

SEEING STARS: FEMALE FILM STARS AND FEMALE AUDIENCES  
IN POST-COLONIAL KOREA

BY

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation examines the complex relationships between Korean cinema's construction of femininity and female audiences' interpretation of such representations while problematizing the master narratives of Western theoretical thinking, colonial and post-colonial discourses, and Korean nationalist discourses. In order to analyze the representations of femininity in post-colonial Korean cinema, I perform semiotic and discourse analyses of the on-screen and off-screen personae of three Korean female film stars from different time periods: Choi Eun-Hee, Chang Mi-Hee, and Jun Ji-Hyun.

While balancing my own analyses of these three stars with the life experiences of Korean and Korean-American women (gathered through focus group interviews) and critical scholarship (primarily drawing on post-colonial feminism and Korean and Korean-American scholars' work), this dissertation explores the continuity and discontinuity that exist across the changing patriarchal values and representational politics, particularly in relation to such gendered processes as decolonization (and re-colonization), modernization, democratization, and globalization.

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## **I. Introduction**

This dissertation examines star-audience relationships in post-colonial Korean cinema focusing on the discourses around the three female stars, Choi Eun-Hee (1930- ), Chang Mi-Hee (1958- ), and Jun Ji-Hyun (1981- ). The term “post-colonial” refers to the historical period after Japanese colonial rule in Korea (post-1945). At the same time, I utilize “the post-colonial” along the lines of a critique of the historical formations of colonial domination and of colonial legacies.

Since Edward Said published his very influential book, *Orientalism*, in 1979, scholarship has focused on the developments and critiques of European imperialism or colonialism. However, the discussion of post-colonial issues in Korea is much more complicated because South Korea has experienced both Japanese colonialism (which was modeled after European imperialism) and US cultural imperialism, and therefore issues of post-coloniality in Korea require more complex analysis. The Japanese colonial era lasted for thirty-five years from 1910 to 1945 in Korea, and after the Korean War (1950-53) US political, economic, and cultural influences have had an enormous impact on South Korea. Thus, any discussion of post-colonial issues in Korean society involves a discussion of the legacies of both Japanese colonialism and US cultural hegemony.

With this goal in mind, this dissertation examines the on-screen and off-screen personae of three Korean female film stars from different time periods in order to analyze the role of these stars as social signs, which carry the cultural meanings and

ideological values of the time. The three Korean female film stars are Choi Eun-Hee who embodies the notion of the traditional Korean mother in the late 1950s and 1960s; Chang Mi-Hee, who portrays a sophisticated modern woman and a mistress type in the late 1970s and 1980s; and Jun Ji-Hyun, whose screen persona embodies a sassy and quirky girl and who became a transnational star in Asia in the early 2000s. The reason for the selection of these three stars is not necessarily because they are the most typical or popular stars of their era, but because they raise interesting questions regarding the construction of femininity and female sexuality. For instance, Choi Eun-Hee portrays a chaste and self-sacrificial mother whose role is inscribed by traditional family values while Chang Mi-Hee portrays a young, modern, and sexually active woman outside of the patriarchal family order. How, then, are these distinctive types of femininity or female sexuality chosen and what meanings and values such choices signify? What social, economic, and historical factors are involved in the construction of such character types? Furthermore, how do these stars' images and their stardom convey particular social issues and ideological tensions of their time?

To explore these complex questions, this dissertation incorporates lived experiences of Korean and Korean-American women. I have conducted four focus group interviews with Korean women living in Korea and Korean-American women living in Kansas, USA in order to perform a cross-cultural analysis. For the purpose of this dissertation, these women function as informants whose responses guide my own analyses of the discourses around the three stars while also drawing on diverse

views in critical scholarship. The purpose of my dissertation, therefore, is to study the complex relationship between Korean cinema's construction of femininity through the images of female stars and female audiences' interpretation of such representations within the context of post-colonial Korean society.<sup>1</sup>

The issue of translation needs to be addressed in any study that involves data collection in multiple languages. The focus group interviews with Korean middle-aged women (group 2) and Korean young females (group 4)<sup>2</sup> were conducted in Korean. The Korean-American middle-aged women (group 1) spoke a mixture of both Korean and English in the focus group interview while the Korean-American young females (group 3) spoke only English in the focus group interview session. While I tried to translate as directly as possible it would be remiss to not acknowledge that certain specificities may have lost in translation. As a translator and a researcher I strive to focus on meaning in both the representation of women in Korean cinema and the larger themes that emerge from the focus group interview data.

These themes are analyzed through the lens of Western feminist film theories of female spectatorship in order to question to what extent they can be applied to Korean and Korean-American women's subject positions. In the process of analysis this dissertation primarily draws on the perspectives of post-colonial feminism and transnational feminism as well as Korean and Korean-American scholars' work to

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<sup>1</sup> A chronology of key historical and political events in South Korea is located in the appendix A. This chronology is provided in order to facilitate a better understanding of the social, historical context in which the three actresses emerge and their images are produced.

<sup>2</sup> I will explain the organization of the four focus groups in the methodology section of chapter two.



explain the complex and multiple spectator positions that Korean and Korean-American women take up in relation to such gendered processes as decolonization (and re-colonization), modernization, democratization, and globalization.

Richard Dyer argues that stars function as signs in society while exposing the internal contradictions at work within the dominant ideologies of specific historical times.<sup>3</sup> Christine Gledhill also notes that stars play an important role “in the production, circulation and negotiation of meanings, identities, desire, and ideologies.”<sup>4</sup> Seen in this view, the ways in which Korean and Korean-American women respond and relate to certain female stars signify multiple subject positions that women can take up in relation to ideal femininity, which the dominant ideologies of the time attempt to construct. The gendered processes in Korea include the ideologies of neo-Confucianism and Japanese colonialism, the experiences of decolonization and modernization processes, and the clash of the traditional values with the imported Western culture. Thus, the popular representation of femininity in Korea emerges as a site of contestation where a set of ideas about femininity or womanhood are created, reinforced and negotiated.

This dissertation considers neo-Confucianism as a construct, that is, an “invented tradition,” which is constructed and re-invented to serve particular ideological purposes. Eric Hobsbawm argues in the introduction of the book, *The Invention of Tradition* (1983), that “[i]nvented tradition’ is taken to mean a set of

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Dyer, *Stars* (British Film Institute, 1979), 3.

<sup>4</sup> Christine Gledhill, ed., *Stardom: Industry of Desire* (Routledge, 1991), xiv.

practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past.”<sup>5</sup> This dissertation’s use of neo-Confucianism is along the lines of Hobsbawm’s concepts of invented tradition and the construction of the past in the sense that my analyses of the representations of the three female stars focus on how and why this old tradition from the pre-modern era is re-interpreted and re-invented for new purposes in post-colonial South Korea in response to changing social values and practices.

Neo-Confucianism was developed by Zhu Xi during the Song dynasty (960-1279) in China, which distinguished itself from the earlier form of Confucianism, and was established as a state ideology during the Chosŏn dynasty (1392-1910) in Korea. The ideology of neo-Confucianism re-emerged and was re-invented in the midst of rapid social transformation in modern, post-colonial Korean nation (e.g., first by the nationalist elites and later by military leaders). While meaning and values associated with neo-Confucianism may be different among Asian countries, this dissertation focuses on the specificities and particular adaptation of neo-Confucian ideology within the context of post-colonial Korean society in relation to the discourses of decolonization and modernization, the development of Korean nationalism, and the formation of collective identity and norms of behavior.

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<sup>5</sup> Eric Hobsbawm & Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1.

This dissertation also considers both sinocization and westernization as a construction, not as an imposition, in which the process of hybridization frequently occurs within the dialectic relationship between foreign cultural values (e.g., neo-Confucianism imported from pre-modern China, capitalism imported from the West primarily through Japan and the US) and Korean culture (e.g., indigenous forms of neo-Confucianism and nascent capitalist practices appropriated for Korean social, economic, and political contexts). In other words, this dissertation is interested in the particular ways in which the modern Korean nation has encountered the West and re-connected with its past, which inevitably constructs the representations of femininity and womanhood in Korean cinema.

Chapter one serves as a general introduction to this dissertation. Chapter two consists of this study's literature review and methodology while bringing together perspectives of star studies and audience studies. The literature review section first looks at key issues and approaches of star studies within Film and Media Studies. It then brings in theoretical approaches to female representation and female spectatorship developed in Anglo-American feminist film criticism. Finally, the literature review section explores post-colonial feminism and transnational feminism – a theoretical framework that informs this dissertation. The methodology section explains the rationale and procedures for the research methods this dissertation utilizes: a combination of semiotic analysis and discourse analysis, and the focus group interview. In this chapter I will also explore the key research questions this dissertation tackles.

Chapter three focuses on the star images of Choi Eun-Hee, one of the most popular female stars in late 1950s and the 1960s in Korean cinema. I perform a semiotic and discourse analysis of Choi's star persona in order to analyze the structured polysemy of Choi's on-screen and off-screen images. Special attention will be paid to the particular ways in which her star persona and stardom articulate, dramatize, or play out the workings of the dominant discourses of the time. In an effort to analyze Choi's on-screen images, I look at character roles and types that she played and the narrative treatments of these roles in her films. I will also examine how Choi was promoted as a traditional and sacrificing mother figure by popular media during the 1960s, despite the diverse character types she portrayed including an elite woman involved in the national reconstruction movement, and a "yanggongju," a prostitute who works for American GIs. In the process of analysis, my interviewees' responses will inform my textual analysis of Choi's star persona. My interpretation of the interviewees' responses will be provided as well in order to discuss the significance and implications of their responses to an understanding of women's proper position and role in postwar Korean society.

Chapter four centers on the modern and sophisticated image of Chang Mi-Hee who emerged as a star in the late 1970s and 1980s under South Korea's military dictatorship and fast economic development. I will focus on the ways in which her star persona is constructed as a neurotic and desperate mistress against the backdrop of modernizing Seoul, the South Korean capital. The structure of this chapter is similar to chapter three. Through a semiotic and discourse analysis, I will integrate

my own textual analysis of Chang's star images (both on-screen and off-screen images) with my interviewees' responses to Chang's star persona and her stardom particularly in relation to the construction of a normative female role and gender relations in Korean society during her stardom.

Chapter five focuses on Jun Ji-Hyun's star images and her transnational stardom in Asia within the socio-economic context of Korean and Asian societies since the late 1990s. Jun portrays a sassy, loud, and domineering girl and at the same time a pure-hearted girl. In this chapter I explore how this transnational star emerges as a channel, rather than a subject, which carries commercial or consumerist concepts and ideas by combining my interviewees' interpretations of Jun's images. While focusing on her body image constructed through both films and television commercials, I discuss the patriarchal myth or tropes underlying Jun's star persona and the implications of her stardom in relation to the intensified consumerist culture in Korea and Asia in an era of globalization.

Chapter six is the conclusion of this dissertation, where I reiterate main arguments and findings of my research. This chapter explains how I began this dissertation project and what kind of difficulties I came across during research. I will also evaluate my findings and limitations.

Western feminist scholarship in Film and Media Studies has developed the idea of Anglo-American women as the norm while paying little attention to differences among women in dealing with issues of female representation and spectatorship. This dissertation intends to de-colonize the knowledge produced by

this tradition of Western feminism by exploring the heterogeneity of womanhood or femininity as well as the complexity and different types of the male gaze (i.e., not merely the male gaze that objectifies women for the heterosexual masculine visual pleasure); and thus this dissertation enriches the discussion of female representations and female subject positions within Film and Media Studies.

## **II. Literature Review and Methodology**

As previously explained in chapter one (introduction), the purpose of this dissertation is twofold. It aims to explore Korean cinema's construction of femininity in the post-colonial era through the images of three stars, Choi Eun-Hee, Chang Mi-Hee and Jun Ji-Hyun. In the process it incorporates Korean and Korean-American female audiences' interpretations of such star images and stardom. The literature review section consists of three parts while bringing together perspectives of star studies and audience studies. It first looks at the development of approaches to the study of stars and stardom in the field of Film and Media Studies. It then moves to issues of female representation and female spectatorship in the context of Hollywood cinema and Anglo-American feminism. Finally, the literature review section will investigate perspectives of post-colonial feminism and transnational feminism, which guide this dissertation's theoretical and methodological framework in exploring the complexity of female subjectivity in relation to post-colonial Korean cinema. The methodology section explains the rationale and procedure for the two research methods that this dissertation engages: a combination of semiotic analysis and discourse analysis, and the focus group interview. In the process, this chapter will also explore the questions and problems that previous theories and methodologies raise as well as the key research questions this dissertation intends to explore.

## A. Star Studies

The critical study of stars and stardom emerged in the mid to late 1970s drawing upon perspectives of semiotics and structuralism. One of the key works that provides a seminal approach to star studies is Richard Dyer's *Stars* (1979). Central to Dyer's approach is the idea of stars as signs, i.e. systems of signifiers that communicate meaning to the audience. Dyer stresses that the study of stars should aim at analyzing star images rather than the true identities of stars while focusing on how these star images are constructed. Dyer utilizes the notion of the "structured polysemy" of the star image; however, he emphasizes that this polysemy is not infinite. Dyer states that "analyses of stars, as images existing in films and other media texts, stress their structured polysemy, that is, the finite multiplicity of meanings and affects they embody and the attempt...to structure them [so] that some meanings and affects are foregrounded and others are masked or displaced."<sup>1</sup> For Dyer, the star image is the product of a range of media texts, which can be grouped together as promotion, publicity, films, and criticism and commentaries. In other words, the polysemy of the star image is constructed both intertextually (through film roles and characters in different films) and extratextually (through promotional texts such as posters and trailers, publicity texts such as tabloids and gossip columns, and commentaries on the star's image).<sup>2</sup> Dyer also points out the complexity between the star's polysemy and the characters he or she plays. He maintains that the star's image

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Dyer, *Stars* (British Film Institute, 1979), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 68-72.



and the narrative character can either match together completely (perfect fit), or contradict each other abruptly (problematic fit), or in most cases, the character emphasizes certain elements of the star's polysemy (selective use).<sup>3</sup>

If star images are constructed across diverse media texts, it is important to note that these star texts are part of the larger discursive system within which they are produced and circulated. Thus, star studies have sought to analyze the meanings of star images in relation to the ideologies of a particular time and place. In his second book, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (1986), Dyer highlights the ways in which star images resolve ideological contradictions by operating in much the same way as myths function in society. Marilyn Monroe is a good example of this in terms of the capacity of her star images to imaginatively resolve conflicting social values. Dyer argues that Monroe appealed to audiences because she was both sexy and innocent, which seemed incompatible for women of that time. Her images embodied contradictory gender values or conflicting notions of female sexuality at a time when a significant shift in the ideology of sexuality and sexual behavior was occurring. What is fascinating about Monroe, however, is her ability to resolve contradictions that cannot be resolved in the social sphere, that is, in real life.<sup>4</sup> According to Dyer, the very appeal of stardom is the ideological function of stars, where they provide fantasy solutions to problems that cannot be easily resolved in reality. Seen in this view, stars do not simply reflect or reproduce ideologies of the time. Rather, they

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 142-149.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (St. Martin's Press, 1986), 19-66.

expose the internal contradictions at work within the dominant ideologies of specific historical times.

Dyer's main focus on star images, however, undermines the significance of other spheres such as the political economy of the star system and star performances, which produce the polysemy of stars.<sup>5</sup> The field of star studies after Dyer has witnessed a move beyond Dyer's position toward a greater emphasis on other spheres. For instance, *Contemporary Hollywood Stardom* (edited by Thomas Austin and Martin Barker) is a collection of articles that deal with the diverse issues of the political economy of stardom, the history of the star system, stars as performers, etc.<sup>6</sup> There have also been challenges to Dyer's thesis about the ideological function of the star to display and resolve social contradictions of the time. Judith Mayne objects to Dyer's idea by observing that "inconsistency, change and fluctuation are characteristic of star images"<sup>7</sup> and thus Mayne questions how unstable and incoherent star images have the potential to reconcile ideological contradictions.<sup>8</sup> Mayne uses the example of Bette Davis' star personae and her stardom to illustrate her point.

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<sup>5</sup> Paul McDonald provides a detailed discussion of problems and challenges to Dyer's approach in "Reconceptualising Stardom" in the second edition of Dyer's *Stars* (British Film Institute, 1998), 177-200.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Austin and Martin Barker, eds., *Contemporary Hollywood Stardom* (Arnold, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> Judith Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship* (Routledge, 1993), 128.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 124-125. Alan Lovell's approach to star studies is similar to that of Mayne. Lovell maintains that "stars are improbable candidates for carrying out the ideological task [Dyer] assigned to them" because they are the "popular opposite" of a coherent and stable identity (261). He instead emphasizes the importance of star performance in the study of stars. See Alan Lovell, "I Went in Search of Deborah Kerr, Jodie Foster and Julianne Moore but Got Waylaid..." in Thomas Austin and Martin Barker eds., *Contemporary Hollywood Stardom* (Arnold, 2003), 259-270.

Mayne emphasizes that “the Bette Davis discourse” (including the theme of female rivalry in her on-screen as well as off-screen personae, her autonomy and control over her own image, and her wide and diverse appeal) oscillates between a number of opposing terms (e.g., love and hate, devotion and obsession, butch and femme). However, Mayne argues that these contradictory qualities in Davis’ star personae are not necessarily connected to a subversive or oppositional function. Rather, the very appeal of Davis’ stardom is “the dissolution of contraries” or “the embrace of widely opposing terms” with one term of the opposite constantly “inflecting” the other term.<sup>9</sup>

Douglas Kellner, on the other hand, provides an alternative view of star studies in response to the changing media culture of contemporary society in his book, *Media Spectacle* (2003). Kellner calls attention to what he terms “megaspaces” (e.g., the O.J. Simpson murder trials, celebrity and political sex scandals), in which a multimedia event comes to dominate a tabloid-frenzy media phenomenon. What makes Kellner’s approach unique is that he focuses on the megaspaces and not the star or celebrity image *per se* as well as the function of the megaspaces to “dramatize” (while also distracting us from) contemporary social issues.<sup>10</sup> Kellner’s idea of megaspaces may not be totally applicable to contemporary media culture in Korea where a tabloid and infotainment culture is not as highly developed as American society. However, Kellner’s approach is still valuable and relevant to this dissertation (and stronger than Dyer’s) in that his

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<sup>9</sup> Judith Mayne, 138.

<sup>10</sup> See Douglas Kellner, Megaspaces: The O.J. Simpson Murder Trial, in *Media Spectacle* (Routledge, 2003), 93-125.

approach moves the focus away from the star image to a particular media event or phenomenon, which functions to dramatize (if not resolve) ideological contradictions at work in society. This dissertation engages with the investigation of the discourses (especially, the production, circulation, and consumption of meaning) surrounding the representations of three Korean female film stars from different time periods in post-colonial Korea. Kellner's approach is especially useful for analyzing the network of ideological discourses from which these stars emerge by paying special attention to the ways in which the entire star phenomena (including the political economy of stardom and the discursive system in which the audience participates) play out certain social issues and their ideological implications. In other words, stars themselves may not have the ability to display or resolve social tensions and contradictions as Dyer has maintained. Rather, a particular media event or phenomenon surrounding a star presents ways to think about social issues and ideological tensions of the time.<sup>11</sup>

Star studies after Dyer are characterized by an expansion of the field into Cultural Studies and Media Studies with special attention to the site of reception on the part of actual audiences. The development of British Cultural Studies at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at Birmingham University and its influence on Film and Media Studies offered a different direction for the study of stars. Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony underlies British Cultural Studies'

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<sup>11</sup> For instance, the megaspectacle of the O.J. Simpson murder trials dramatizes the state of American society's identity politics during the mid-1990s where conflicts around race, gender, and class were no longer a mere academic affair but an essential part of social issues in daily life. It also indicates how important the political role of media culture and/or celebrity culture has become in contemporary society and how much impact such a controversial issue as the Simpson murder case can have on the fragmentations of opinion in terms of identity politics.

framework and this concept refers to the process by which a dominant social group earns and maintains consent to its dominance politically and culturally so that the dominant ideology becomes naturalized.<sup>12</sup> What is significant in Gramsci's view is that "‘hegemony’ is never a permanent state of affairs and never uncontested."<sup>13</sup> From this standpoint, the works of British Cultural Studies consider the sphere of culture (e.g., film and media texts) as a site of struggle over meaning while the hegemonic view seeks to install itself as the consensual vision in a particular historical context. Such a point of view also proposes that audiences are engaged in this struggle over meaning as well.<sup>14</sup> Drawing on the Cultural Studies approach, such scholars as Jackie Stacey and Joshua Gamson carried out empirical studies on the relationship between stars and their fans.

Jackie Stacey's book, *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship* (1994), functions as a bridge between the Film Studies and Cultural Studies approaches to stars. Stacey conducted empirical research on the star-audience relationship from a feminist point-of-view in order to analyze the complex ways in which women in Britain recall and understand Hollywood female stars of the 1940s and 1950s. Stacey published advertisements in popular women's magazines to

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<sup>12</sup> Sue Thornham, *Passionate Detachments: An Introduction to Feminist Film Theory* (Arnold, 1997), 70.

<sup>13</sup> Stuart Hall, Cultural Studies and the Centre: Some Problematics and Problems, in Stuart Hall et al, *Culture, Media, Language* (Hutchinson, 1980), 36.

<sup>14</sup> Dyer's position shares elements of the Cultural Studies approach in the sense that he develops his account of the star text as part of a larger ideological system, in which negotiation occurs between the star, the various media texts and the audience. However, Dyer paid little attention to the point of reception, that is, the function of audiences when they participate in the negotiation of the star's polysemy.

collect letters and questionnaires from female audiences. Over three hundred women replied, describing their identification with stars in different ways. For instance, some respondents admired and worshiped the star as representing the ideal “feminine attractiveness”<sup>15</sup> while others would imitate a star’s behavior or copy her styles.<sup>16</sup> Stacey emphasizes the significance of stars in the everyday lives of British women at that time. In wartime and postwar Britain, Hollywood films represented images of abundance and affluence, which offered an escapist spectacle. Yet, the consumption and appropriation of star styles by these British women functioned as a way of responding to the harshness of their lives.<sup>17</sup> Even though the styles are designed as a spectacle for male desire, they can also act as resistance and escapism from the difficulties women audiences experience in their everyday lives. Stacey’s work, thus, suggests that Hollywood female stars offered British female audiences alternative and diverse ways of making sense of their conditions during the 1940s and the 1950s.

Joshua Gamson’s *Claims to Fame: Celebrity in Contemporary America* (1994) is another example of empirical research that focuses on the role of audiences building identities through stars. Gamson conducted sixteen focus group interviews with people who regularly paid attention to stars and habitually read or watched celebrity texts (i.e., celebrity-based publications or programs). Gamson identifies five types of fans who use different interpretive strategies to engage with stars or

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<sup>15</sup> Jackie Stacey, *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship* (Routledge, 1994), 151-158.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 162-170.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 184-187.

celebrities in a text. The “traditionalist” or “believer” regards the star or the celebrity as a realistic representation. The “second-order believer” considers the star/celebrity to be basically realistic but acknowledges the highly constructed nature of the star/celebrity text. The “postmodernist” interprets stars as purely fictional constructs and derives pleasure from deconstructing images and dwelling on the play of images. The “gossiper game-player” understands the star/celebrity text as semi-fictional and enjoys the exchange of information with other gossipers. Finally, the “detective game-player” is someone who considers the star as semi-fictional and finds pleasure in the process of detection or the act of uncovering the truth about the star.<sup>18</sup> Both Stacey and Gamson’s work contributes to the field of star studies by indicating that stars serve multiple and variable functions for audiences. However, their research relies on the assumption that stars are only meaningful for their fans. This dissertation attempts to broaden the discussion to include reactions from diverse audiences (i.e., non-fans).

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<sup>18</sup> Joshua Gamson, *Claims to Fame: Celebrity in Contemporary America* (University of California Press, 1994), 142-185.

## **B. Female Representation and Female Spectatorship:**

### **Anglo-American Feminist Approaches**

Stars play an important role “in the production, circulation and negotiation of meanings, identities, desires, and ideologies” as Christine Gledhill stresses in her introduction to the anthology, *Stardom: Industry of Desire* (1991).<sup>19</sup> The role of stars has been particularly associated with questions of gender, especially for female stars. *Popcorn Venus* and *From Reverence to Rape* are two pioneering works that provide a historical overview of female representation in Hollywood films. In *Popcorn Venus* (1973), Marjorie Rosen traces Hollywood representations of women from the 1910s to the 1970s. Rosen analyzes how the male-oriented Hollywood film industry shaped its female stars and structured its narratives while reflecting social changes from decade to decade. Rosen defines female stars, or “Popcorn Venuses,” as the embodiment of patriarchal myths about what women are or should be in patriarchal society.<sup>20</sup> Thus, for Rosen, the idealized images of female stars are unrealistic and damaging, which misrepresents the real experiences of women.

Molly Haskell’s *From Reverence to Rape* (1974) also provides a comprehensive analysis of the stereotypical treatment of women in Hollywood films. Haskell maintains that Hollywood films have categorized female types in terms of the dichotomy of the virgin versus the whore.<sup>21</sup> Hollywood narratives, based on this

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<sup>19</sup> Christine Gledhill, ed., *Stardom: Industry of Desire* (Routledge, 1991), xiv.

<sup>20</sup> Marjorie Rosen, *Popcorn Venus* (McCann & Geoghegan, 1973), 154.

<sup>21</sup> Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape* (University of Chicago Press, 1974), xiv.



dichotomy, endow female characters that conform to the “myths of subjection and sacrifice” with the fulfillment of romantic relationships in the form of a happy marriage.<sup>22</sup> To the contrary, intelligent and ambitious women who violate patriarchal norms by competing professionally with men are depicted as something monstrous and ultimately punished by the narrative’s conclusion.<sup>23</sup> Regardless of the endings, however, Haskell suggests that what audiences retain of female stars such as Bette Davis, Joan Crawford, and Katherine Hepburn is not the images of subordination or sacrifice. Rather, audiences remember those moments and the images of stars that display female strength and authority.<sup>24</sup>

Rosen and Haskell’s thesis in their historical investigations of female representations in Hollywood cinema can also be applied to mainstream Korean cinema. The Korean film industry has undoubtedly been male-dominated and Korean films have consequently constructed their narratives and the images of female stars in particular ways to reproduce patriarchal myths about femininity and female sexuality in Korean society. Such representations of women in Korean films have changed over time while reflecting the changing position of women within Korean society. However, I object to Rosen and Haskell’s simple reflectionist account: as society changes, stars reflect those changes. Their arguments, based on a direct relation between representation and social changes, cannot sufficiently account for how

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 31.

discursive systems function to communicate meaning through the star text or star phenomenon. This dissertation explores such questions as what kinds of femininity or female sexuality the three Korean actresses respectively embody, what myths or tropes are involved in the representations of the three stars, and how actual female audiences (Korean and Korean-American women) respond to such representations and the underlying fantasy appeal of the three stars. Thus, the primary concern of this dissertation is the social, economic, and historical factors operating within the particular production and reception of the three stars' images and their stardom.

Rosen and Haskell take different positions in regards to actual audiences' identification with star images. Rosen proposes that "a gullible public" passively adopts the stereotypical representation that male fantasies have inscribed.<sup>25</sup> In this sense, women's identification with female stars provides nothing but a false consciousness; thus, there is no possibility of resistance or oppositional reading. From a more optimistic view (or from the postmodernist position in terms of Gamson's categories of interpretive strategies), Haskell suggests that viewers may actively interpret images of stars regardless of what the ideological Hollywood narratives force them to identify. This celebration of female audiences as autonomous agents departs from the prevailing notion of spectatorship in Film Studies in the 1970s. However, Haskell's proposition was never supported beyond her own memories and impressions about some powerful images of female stars.

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<sup>25</sup> Marjorie Rosen, 9.

Screen theory, drawn from a psychoanalytic framework, dominated feminist accounts of female subjectivity during the 1970s. According to this theory, female spectators passively occupy the subject position that the cinematic apparatus assigns to them. Laura Mulvey created a model for the psychoanalytic theory of female spectatorship while also creating a lot of debates regarding the issues of the female subject position. Mulvey employs psychoanalytic theory as “a political weapon” in order to demonstrate “the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form” in her seminal essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975).<sup>26</sup> Drawing on Freud’s concepts of scopophilia (pleasure in looking at another person as an erotic object), voyeurism, and fetishism, as well as Lacanian theories of the formation of subjectivity, Mulvey addresses the issue of female spectatorship within the mechanisms of looking in cinema. She argues that the institution of cinema addresses itself to an ideal male spectator while subordinating and objectifying the female via its coordination of three looks: “that of the camera as it records the pro-filmic event, that of the audience as it watches the final product, and that of the characters at each other within the screen illusion.”<sup>27</sup> For Mulvey, pleasure in looking is split between the active male gaze and the passive female image. The weakness of Mulvey’s argument, however, lies in its totalizing view in which female stars only exist in terms of their “to-be-looked-at-ness,” functioning as erotic objects for the voyeuristic male gaze. Moreover, Mulvey’s model provides no space for the

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<sup>26</sup> Laura Mulvey, Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema, 1975, in Patricia Erens ed., *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism* (Indiana University Press, 1990), 28.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 39.

discussion of viewing pleasure or the identification of the female spectator. It cannot answer such questions as how the female spectator experiences visual pleasure and what spectator position she occupies.

Later, Mulvey takes up the issue of the female spectator in an article, “Afterthought on ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ Inspired by King Vidor’s *Duel In the Sun* (1946)” (1981). Mulvey draws on Freud’s account of the development of femininity, in which he maintains that the libido (the motivating force of sexual life) is of a masculine nature regardless of sexual difference and that sexual maturity in women involves the repression of masculinity. However, Freud points to the frequent regressions to the pre-Oedipal masculine phase or alteration between masculinity and femininity in women’s lives.<sup>28</sup> Mulvey argues that when the female spectator views “Hollywood genre films structured around masculine pleasure,” she may identify with “the active point of view” while rediscovering the “lost aspect of her sexual identity, the never fully repressed bedrock of feminine neurosis.”<sup>29</sup> The female spectator, then, seems to easily borrow masculinity and is able to derive visual pleasure. Mulvey concludes that the female spectator either identifies with the passive object of the male gaze or adopts an active masculine position. Yet, this “oscillation between passive femininity and regressive masculinity”<sup>30</sup> is still not an

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<sup>28</sup> Laura Mulvey, Afterthought on ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ Inspired by King Vidor’s *Duel In the Sun* (1946), 1981, in E. Ann Kaplan ed., *Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Routledge, 1990), 25.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 31.

easy task for women. As Mulvey argues, the female spectator's fantasy of masculinization is to some extent "at cross-purposes with itself, restless in its transvestite clothes."<sup>31</sup>

Mulvey's theory of the female spectator created strong responses and criticisms among feminist film critics because of its phallocentric viewpoint. By positioning masculinity as a norm, the female spectator's visual pleasure seemed only possible through a metaphor of masculinity in Mulvey's framework. While revising or reworking Mulvey's polemic, feminist film critics explored what possible female gaze or pleasure might exist. Mary Ann Doane replaces Mulvey's division of male/active and female/passive with a binary opposition of male/distance and female/proximity in "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator" (1982). Referring to Freud, Doane argues that the mechanisms of voyeurism and fetishism function to establish distance between spectator and image, which characterizes the male spectator's position, whereas overidentification with the image is typical of the female's spectatorial position.<sup>32</sup> Doane draws on the strategy of masquerade, which a psychoanalyst, Joan Riviere, first theorized in 1929. The masquerade refers to the way in which a successful woman displays excessive femininity in her interaction with men in order to hide the possession of threatening masculinity. Doane argues that "womanliness is a mask which can be worn or removed. The masquerade's resistance to patriarchal positioning would therefore lie

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>32</sup> Mary Ann Doane, *Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator*, 1982, in Patricia Erens, ed., *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism* (Indiana University Press, 1990), 44-45.

in its denial of the production of femininity as closeness, as presence-to-itself, as, precisely, imagistic.”<sup>33</sup> In other words, this wearing of femininity as a mask enables the female spectator to create a distance, allowing her to play with the identifications offered by the film text for her own pleasure. Unlike Mulvey’s transvestite female spectator, Doane’s spectator does not need to assume a male subject position in order to experience cinematic pleasure. Rather, the female spectator plays the role of woman while creating a critical distance from the image on screen.

Gaylyn Studlar, on the other hand, attempts to break with the model of cinematic spectatorship (e.g., Mulvey, Doane) in which visual pleasure centers around sadistic control and as a result, theorizes “the male controlling gaze as the only position of spectatorial pleasure.”<sup>34</sup> Studlar rejects Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis on which the work of Mulvey and Doane is based. She instead draws on a model suggested by Gilles Deleuze’s *Masochism: An Interpretation of Coldness and Cruelty* to argue for a masochistic pleasure in film. According to Studlar, cinematic pleasure is much closer to the submissive pleasure of masochism rather than to the sadistic, controlling pleasure that Mulvey and Doane describe.<sup>35</sup> Focusing on the pre-Oedipal desires and the close relationship between the infant and the mother formed during the oral phase, she emphasizes the pleasure in submission for

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>34</sup> Gaylyn Studlar, *Masochism and the Perverse Pleasures of the Cinema*, in Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen, Leo Braudy eds., *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings* (Oxford University Press, 1992), 773.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 784.

both sexes. Within masochism, Studlar argues that “the mother is not defined as lack” but is seen as powerful “because she possesses what the male lacks-the breast and the womb.”<sup>36</sup> Pleasure, then, derives from submission to this “almighty pre-Oedipal mother,”<sup>37</sup> and not from the mastery or possession of the female, within the masochist fantasy. Referring to Jean-Louis Baudry’s analogy of the cinematic apparatus as a dream screen, she likens spectatorial pleasure in film to the position of the child who desires to be controlled and to “return to the non-differentiated body state of the mother-child.”<sup>38</sup> In other words, the spectator of the cinematic dream screen regresses to a state similar to that of the infant in the masochist fantasy and re-experiences the primary identification with the mother. Therefore, Studlar’s masochistic model goes beyond the issue of whether the gaze or pleasure of the spectator is essentially masculine. Studlar provides a completely different proposition from the deterministic, polarized model of Mulvey’s and opens a space for the more fluid subject positions in the structure of looking in cinema.

Another critic who challenges Mulvey’s and Doane’s models is Linda Williams. Williams utilizes American sociologist Nancy Chodorow’s theory about the mother-daughter bond to account for a more socially constructed concept of the female spectator. In “Something Else Besides a Mother: *Stella Dallas* and the Maternal Melodrama” (1990), Williams emphasizes the life-long closeness between a

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 780.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 785.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 787.

mother and daughter as a positive model for the female spectator's identification. Following Chodorow, Williams maintains that "girls never entirely break with their original relationship to their mothers" due to their sexual identities as women. The girl would simply "add her love for her father, and finally her love for a man to her original relation to her mother," which means that she develops "the multiple and continuous female identity capable of fluidly shifting" between different points of view.<sup>39</sup> For Williams, the maternal melodrama, such as *Stella Dallas* (1937), is of special importance because it contains the viewing positions that "demand a female reading competence" developed through "the social construction of female identity."<sup>40</sup> Williams argues that *Stella Dallas* offers a number of female subject positions (e.g., Laurel, her stepmother, Stella). Thus, the female spectator is invited to view the film "from a variety of subject positions" often identifying with contradiction itself.<sup>41</sup> This multiple and often contradictory identification is possible through women's experiences of the socially constructed roles as daughters, wives, and mothers in patriarchy. Williams concludes that the maternal melodrama offers an important source of realistic reflection on women's lives and demonstrates the possibilities of Hollywood films to generate feminist readings.<sup>42</sup> Williams' view also departs from the phallogentric accounts of Mulvey and Doane, which attempt to

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<sup>39</sup> Linda Williams, *Something Else Beside a Mother: Stella Dallas and the Maternal Melodrama*, in Patricia Erens ed., *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism* (Indiana University Press, 1990), 144.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.



define femininity through masculinity. It provides more fluid subject positions of the female by pointing to the ways in which women identify with all of the conflicting points of view and characters instead of identifying with one specific position.

The theoretical stances discussed above (Laura Mulvey onwards) have had a great influence on Film Studies; however, there are three, correlated, problematic directions within them. First, the theories of female spectatorship by Mulvey, Doane, Studlar, and Williams provide a totalizing framework by excessively concentrating on the ahistorical concepts of visual pleasure and identification. These feminist film scholars also suggest that pleasure and identification are inherently embedded in the cinematic structure and organized along the lines of two genders: male and female. Therefore, their theories cannot answer such questions as what happens when a homosexual male or female looks at the screen (e.g., what kind of pleasure homosexuals or bisexuals derive from the narrative structure and with what gaze they identify) and whether the female spectator from the 1970s experiences the same kinds of pleasure that female spectators experience in other decades. In short, the totalizing and polarizing theories by these feminist film scholars cannot sufficiently explain the complexity of the female spectator's subjectivity due to their universal construction of visual pleasure and identification process.

Secondly, these feminist film theories are subject to the charge of textual determinism (defining the audiences solely in terms of their viewing positions) and thus provide an ahistorical, essentialist paradigm of audiences. British Cultural Studies marked a pivotal point in the influencing of a more heterogeneous model of

cinematic spectatorship. While the previous models assume the viewers as passive effects of the mechanisms of the text, a number of empirical studies carried out by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at Birmingham University offered a different approach to audiences. For instance, Stacey and Gamson's empirical research projects, which illustrate the Cultural Studies position in regards to the text-audience relationship, underscored the audiences' active engagement with the stars and what stars mean to them. Cultural Studies' framework has produced quite a few empirical audience research studies, examples of which I will discuss in the next section in relation to the methodology this dissertation project utilizes.

Finally, the third problematic stance results from feminist film scholars' prioritization of gender differences over other categories of social, racial, and sexual differences. However productive the binary opposition between male and female has been in the study of the female spectator, such a view bases its argument on the idea of the universal female. As a result, it develops white middle-class heterosexual First-World women as the norm while obscuring other differences such as race, class, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and national identity. In the late 1970s, however, a number of feminist critics began to criticize this tradition of Western feminism for speaking on behalf of all women, and instead explored the intersections of gender with other categories of difference. I interrogate this alternative tradition of post-colonial feminism (e.g., black feminism, Third World feminism), in the following section while also discussing its theoretical positions along the lines of the more

inclusive approach of transnational feminism, whose theories and methodologies are informed by post-colonial feminism.

### C. Post-colonial and Transnational Feminist Approaches

Black feminist critics played a key role in changing the configuration of monolithic feminism by vigorously raising issues of difference among women, especially in terms of race. Black women's experiences were inextricably implicated in the historical process of colonialism, which transported and enslaved them, or made them diasporic in the First World. Black feminism and Third World feminism in this sense share a common political goal to explore the histories and struggles of oppressed women against racism, sexism, and colonialism. However, as bell hooks argues in *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981), the effects of racism and sexism on black women during slavery were so severe and violent that the experiences of other groups of women are not comparable to that of black women in American society.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, this dissertation considers black feminism a separate category, and focuses on Third World feminism as it pertains to this dissertation project. Third World feminism has made similar political interventions to that of black feminism in its opposition to forms of domination and exploitation. Yet, Third World feminism calls into question the conditions of women within the inequalities of the world economic order between the First World and the Third World.

Cheril Johnson-Odim criticizes the narrow conception of Western “‘mainstream’ (i.e., liberal gender-specific) feminism.”<sup>44</sup> Johnson-Odim argues that

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<sup>43</sup> bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (South End Press, 1981).

<sup>44</sup> Cheril Johnson-Odim, Common Themes, Different Contexts: Third World Women and Feminism, in Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russon, and Lourdes Torres eds., *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Indiana University Press, 1991), 316.

“gender discrimination is neither the sole nor perhaps the primary locus of the oppression of Third World women. Thus, a narrowly defined feminism, taking the eradication of gender discrimination as the route of ending women’s oppression, is insufficient to redress the oppression of Third World women.”<sup>45</sup> While emphasizing “conceptual and practical differences between Third World and Euro-American First World women in relation to feminism,”<sup>46</sup> Johnson-Odim opposes an ahistorical assumption that women in the Third World have been more oppressed by an indigenous patriarchal system than women in the West. She maintains that what is important is not the “analysis of the *degree* of different women’s oppression” but the investigation of the complex structural elements that participate in the oppression of Third World women not only in an indigenous cultural context but also within the operation of the current world system.<sup>47</sup>

Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s essay, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse” (1984/2003) marks another significant critique of Western feminism. Mohanty attacks the idea of a universal “Woman” based upon which Western feminists have colonized “the Third World woman” by constituting her as “a singular monolithic subject.”<sup>48</sup> Mohanty distinguishes “Woman” from

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 315.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 314.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 321-312.

<sup>48</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses*, in *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Duke University Press, 2003), 17.

“women”<sup>49</sup> in order to criticize the ethnocentrism of First World feminists that arbitrarily constructed a homogeneous and ahistorical notion of “the third-world difference.”<sup>50</sup> Mohanty argues that Western feminist scholarship has produced “the image of an ‘average third-world woman’” who lives a life according to “her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and her being ‘Third World’ (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.).” This image of an average Third World woman, Mohanty continues, contrasts well with the “self-representation of Western women as educated, as modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities and the freedom to make their own decisions.”<sup>51</sup>

Just as Western mainstream feminism creates a universal category of the female (i.e., the white middle-class female), post-colonial discourse constructs a single category of the colonized (i.e., the indigenous male) while ignoring gender differences within the formation of the colonized subject. In opposition to such a gender bias, post-colonial feminist critics emphasize the need to take into consideration how colonialism operates differently for women and for men in any analysis of colonial oppression. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is one of the most influential critics who consistently inflects post-colonialism with a feminist agenda.

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<sup>49</sup> Woman refers to “a cultural and ideological composite Other constructed through diverse representational discourse while women mean “real, material subjects of their collective histories.” See Mohanty, 19.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 22.

Focusing primarily on the colonized female and her heirs in the neo-colonial condition, Spivak criticizes the discursive techniques by which the identity of the (neo-)colonial subject is constructed.

In “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988/1994), Spivak utilizes and extends Antonio Gramsci’s concept of the subaltern in order to explore the predicament of the female subaltern, especially focusing on Indian women. Spivak examines the debates over the abolition of sati (the immolation of Hindu widows) in early nineteenth century India. She explains that the key discursive technique of the British colonizers was to protect and “save brown women from brown men” who supposedly enforced the barbaric custom of sati. The counter argument by the indigenous Indian male was that “the women actually wanted to die” in the defense of tradition against colonialism. In both interpretations of sati, Spivak argues, the voice of the female can only be spoken for or represented in distorted or “interested” fashion by others.<sup>52</sup> In maintaining that “there is no space from which the sexed subaltern subject can speak,”<sup>53</sup> Spivak points to the double colonization when women are subject both to discrimination as colonial subjects within imperialism and gender subordination within patriarchy. Spivak concludes with the declaration that “the subaltern cannot speak.”<sup>54</sup> However, this does not mean that there is no way for the oppressed group to voice their resistance. Rather, Spivak’s particular targets are contemporary

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<sup>52</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman ed., *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader* (Columbia University Press, 1994), 93.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

Western radical intellectuals, that is, the “benevolent” Western scholars who attempt to “speak for” the subaltern condition<sup>55</sup>.

While criticizing French feminism as well as Anglo-American feminism, Spivak suggests, in her book, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (1987) that “the academic feminist must learn to learn from [Third World women], to speak to them, to suspect that their access to the political and sexual scene is not merely to be *corrected* by our superior theory and enlightened compassion.”<sup>56</sup> Although the question of how to speak to the subaltern subject as academics is central to her argument, Spivak is opposed to the assumption that there is a “pure” or “essential” form of subaltern consciousness that can be recovered. She criticizes the essentialist view of the Indian Subaltern Studies Group, a project led by Ranajit Guha. According to Spivak, the Subaltern Studies Group’s efforts to locate and re-establish a voice, i.e., a collective locus of agency in post-colonial India, are misleading because it is impossible to retrieve original subaltern consciousness independently of (neo-)colonial imperatives of political domination, economic exploitation, and cultural exclusion. Moreover, she suggests that any attempt to reclaim collective

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<sup>55</sup> In her essay, “French Feminism in an International Frame,” Spivak provides Julia Kristeva’s “About Chinese Women” as an example of the self-interested intervention by a First World feminist on behalf of the subaltern woman. Kristeva addresses the issue of non-Western women by examining the figure of the ancient Chinese matriarch as a pre-oedipal femininity that disrupts Western psychoanalytic discourse. Despite its celebration of the Chinese “feminine,” Spivak considers Kristeva’s text to be self-serving because it pretends to speak for the Chinese woman while allowing no agency and constructing the Chinese woman unquestionably as Other. See Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (Methuen, 1987), 134-153.

<sup>56</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (Methuen, 1987), 135.



speech or a collective cultural identity will inevitably result in ethnocentrism, which does not account for the heterogeneity of the colonized subalterns.<sup>57</sup>

What Spivak asks for, instead, is “the developing of a reading method that is sensitive to gender, race, and class”<sup>58</sup> in an effort to articulate the intersection of subalternity experienced by the heterogeneous oppressed who are excluded from any meaningful role in society by virtue of gender subordination, racial discrimination, and economic disadvantage. At the same time, she emphasizes the need to attend sufficiently to both the contemporary international division of labor (the First World being in the position of investing capital; the Third World being in the position of providing the field for investment and exploitation) and the historical experience of colonialism. The principal task of post-colonial feminism, then, is to interrogate women’s positions within the complex structures of oppression based on race, class, and gender, or resulting from (neo)-colonialism.

Trinh T. Minh-ha similarly underscores the impossibility of the recovery of authenticity or the “pure” native in her book, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (1989). She challenges the notion of the “real” native, with which the white mainstream anthropologists and tourists alike have long been preoccupied. Like Spivak, Trinh T. Minh-ha argues against the simplistic idea of nativism that promotes and reconstructs the image of the “unspoiled” native that is

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 202-6

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 81.

truly different from the West as it existed in the pre-colonial era.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, Minh-ha foregrounds the heterogeneity among the categories of “racial and ethnic women,” “non-Western women,” and “postcolonial Third World women.”<sup>60</sup> By utilizing citations from other racial and ethnic women’s writings and a collage of stills from her own films, she stresses diverse female voices and the gap between them. Her collection of these different female voices precisely reveals the difficulty of representing many forms of otherness through the binary opposition of the West and the non-West. In other words, she resists categorizing or essentializing Third World women either as “like the West” or “unlike the West.” She, therefore, calls for a non-binary understanding of difference.<sup>61</sup>

Trinh T. Minh-ha maintains that any kind of binarism (male or female, West or non-West, center or margin, white or black, etc.) becomes akin to the logics of Western domination (a totalizing, essentialist paradigm); thus, to identify with one term of the binary opposition is to submit to these logics and re-inscribe subordinate positions in society. Minh-ha exemplifies this idea by the incidents when women of color feel obliged to choose either identifying as a woman or a person of color. Having to choose between womanhood and ethnicity relates to a way of colonizing Third World women and essentializing women.<sup>62</sup> Thus, Minh-ha opposes the

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<sup>59</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Indiana University Press, 1989), 88.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 84-106.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

unifying and essentializing category of woman or ethnicity, which Western mainstream feminism and colonial discourse have constructed. Similar to Mohanty and Spivak, Minh-ha emphasizes the hybridity of individual subject positions, inscribed not only by gender, but by discourses of nation, class, region, color, and sexuality as well. For Minh-ha, it is the heterogeneities (i.e., the multiplicity of exclusions, the paradoxical hybridities and intersections of racial, ethnic, non-Western, and postcolonial identities) that disrupt the master narratives of Western theories. She, therefore, stresses that writing from positions of sexual and cultural difference will offer alternative insights into Third World women's experiences and subject positions.

Echoing Spivak and Minh-ha, Rey Chow offers a critique of the way that Western intellectuals have traditionally conceived of China and the East in her book, *Woman and Chinese Modernity: Politics of Reading Between East and West* (1991). In examining modern Chinese texts and texts on modern China, she recognizes her "double task: that of criticizing both the hegemonic status of western theoretical thinking and the entrenched ways of interpretation in the field of Chinese literature."<sup>63</sup> She provides examples of cross-cultural mis-readings between China and the West in Bernardo Bertolucci's film, *The Last Emperor* (1987) and Julia Kristeva's article, "About Chinese Women." Chow maintains that Bertolucci directed the film in light of his imaginary China, which is located before and outside

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<sup>63</sup> Rey Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity: Politics of Reading Between East and West* (University of Minnesota Press, 1991), xii.

corrupt Western consumerism. At the same time, Chow examines how the film, through the use of the camera, reaffirms the otherness of China by feminizing the last emperor, Pu Yi.<sup>64</sup> In regards to “About Chinese Women,” Chow argues that Kristeva valorizes a different kind of femininity found in pre-modern China only to use China as “the ‘negative’ or ‘repressed’ side of Western discourse.”<sup>65</sup> According to Chow, both Bertolucci’s and Kristeva’s critiques of Western culture and their idealization of China perpetuate the ideological division of the West and the East, and at the same time, reinforce the persistent image of China as feminine.

What makes Chow’s position unique and sets it apart from Spivak’s and Minh-ha’s theories is her second task of criticizing sinologists and Chinese intellectuals, whom she blames for constructing the way the West “sees” China in terms of “a still-intact tradition.”<sup>66</sup> Chow points to the tendency in the field of China Studies in the West and particularly in American universities to excessively concentrate on thousands of years of Chinese history and tradition. Then, it is the sinologists and Chinese intellectuals who have structured the image of “China as History at a standstill.”<sup>67</sup> Chow argues that such a tendency in China Studies has ended up “othering” China by offering Chinese culture as an ideal object of study to the West and confirming once again the dichotomy between the West and the East.

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 28.

While refusing the notion of China as representing an “absolute difference” from the West, Chow acknowledges the dilemma of her own critical position as a Westernized Third-World woman. She questions what critical stance ethnic individuals can take when they are already westernized due to the history of Western imperialism. She, thus, clarifies that her ground for theorizing China is neither in the Chinese nor the Western but rather in “the dialectic between ‘Chinese’ and ‘Western.’”<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, she uses the notion of “woman” as a tool for theorizing the position of the ethnic spectator, “who is caught, in a cross-cultural context, between the gaze that represents her and the image that is supposed to be her.”<sup>69</sup> For Chow, “‘woman’ deals not only with gender but also with the power-invested processes of hierarchization and marginalization that are involved in readings of culture.”<sup>70</sup> Therefore, Chow comes to a conclusion that “‘woman’ does not simply amount to a new type of literary content but, more so, to a new agency, a dialectic of resistance-in-givenness that is constitutive of modernity in non-Western, but Westernized, context.”<sup>71</sup> Unlike Spivak, who stresses the impossibility of the subaltern female speaking for herself, Chow explores the possibility of resistance when the marginalized female paradoxically negotiates from within what is “given” by the West. The task of a post-colonial feminist critic, then, is to transform her

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., xi-xii.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 170.

Westernized consciousness into “resistance-in-giveness” through a dialectic double-play in order to reveal the ideological workings of hierarchization and marginalization. Thus, Chow’s optimistic view suggests that by virtue of a dynamic negotiation between the West versus non-West dichotomy a new feminist subjectivity emerges.

While calling for a radical decolonization of Western feminist scholarship, post-colonial feminist scholars insist upon cultural and historical specificities of race, class, nationality, and sexualities that intersect with gender. It is useful to incorporate the perspectives of transnational feminism without distinguishing it as a separate category from post-colonial feminism because both feminist traditions share common views and political agendas in many meaningful ways. Transnational feminism refers to a contemporary paradigm, which attempts to address issues of women and gender on a global scale, with special attention to the roles of race, ethnicity, sexuality, nation-state, and economic exploitation in the context of global capitalism or globalization. At the same time, transnational feminism differentiates itself from the previous practices of international feminism, which relies on a utopian vision of “global sisterhood.” Transnational feminist practices, thus, resist the colonial attitudes of superiority embedded in the notion of global sisterhood, which assumes a progression toward a better order for women with Western feminists leading such a

progression while enlightening and emancipating their sister-Others from all oppressive patriarchal structures around the world.<sup>72</sup>

Both post-colonial feminism and transnational feminism highlight the importance of a feminist understanding of colonial history and the legacies of colonialism while engaging with de-colonizing feminist practices across borders (cultural, sexual, racial, national, and class). The theories and methodologies of post-colonial feminism have informed the study of “transnationality” as Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan acknowledge in an article, “Postcolonial Studies and Transnational Feminist Practices” (2000). For instance, notions of subalternity (Spivak), hybridity (Minh-ha), and resistance-in-givenness (Chow) provide transnational feminists with conceptual tools to examine representational politics in a cross-cultural, globalized context. Furthermore, post-colonial feminism’s emphasis on the long history of colonialism has helped transnational feminists investigate issues of race, ethnicity, gender, class, and sexuality as power-invested processes that “travel” across different times and places.<sup>73</sup>

Yet, post-colonial feminism ended up being reduced to institutional practices in the U.S. and Europe. Technically speaking, post-colonial feminism refers to the

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<sup>72</sup> For instance, Nima Naghibi explores the relationships between feminism and imperialism within the discourses of global sisterhood. Naghibi criticizes Western women’s involvement in women’s issues in Iran ranging from projects by female adventurers and Christian missionaries during the mid-nineteenth century to enlighten their “veiled Muslim sisters” to the involvement of such feminists as Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem in the Iranian feminism movement before and during the 1979 revolution in Iran. See Nima Naghibi, *Rethinking Global Sisterhood: Western Feminism and Iran* (University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

<sup>73</sup> This part of discussion draws upon the views of Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan in “Postcolonial Studies and Transnational Feminist Practices” (2000), *Jouvert: A Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, Vol. 5. Issue 1.

intellectual discourses produced by a group of female scholars who are originally from the Third World. These scholars have teaching and research careers at American or European universities, and publish their work (primarily in English) through metropolitan publishing companies (i.e., major publishers in London, Paris, New York, etc). Contemporary transnational feminist practices recognize post-colonial feminism's limitation as an elite tradition and attempt to transcend its narrow scope while utilizing its powerful analytical tools and critical views in an effort to build a more inclusive map of feminist exchange and cross-cultural dialogue in a global context. According to Grewal and Kaplan, the major issues transnational feminism tackles include: (1) the question of how to think about gender in a world whose boundaries have changed in an era of globalization; (2) the ways in which gender, class, religious traditions, and sexuality produce different kinds of women or femininity in relation to different kinds of patriarchies; (3) the particular ways in which the impact of global forces (e.g., colonialism, development and modernization projects, global capitalism, and consumerism) and other gendering practices create inequalities and asymmetric power structures.<sup>74</sup>

This dissertation draws on the perspectives, concepts, and approaches of post-colonial feminism and transnational feminism in analyzing the star images and stardom of Choi Eun-Hee, Chang Mi-Hee, and Jun Ji-Hyun within the changing representational politics in post-colonial Korea as well as the complexities of Korean female subjectivity in a cross-cultural context in relation to the role of nation-state,

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., <http://social.chass.ncsu.edu/jouvert/v5i1/grewal.htm>



the film industry, the history of colonialisms (e.g., Japanese colonialism, The US cultural imperialism), and emergent globalizing forces. I will explain how post-colonial and transnational feminism guide my methodology in the following section.

## **D. Methodology**

The two research methods this dissertation utilizes are a combination of semiotic analysis and discourse analysis and the focus group interview. Semiotics refers to the study of signs and offers analytical tools for understanding how signs work and produce meaning. Utilizing this analytical tool, a semiotic analysis in Film and Media Studies seeks to deconstruct a particular image and examine the ways that image makes sense and communicates meaning. Semiotic analysis also enables us to look beneath the smooth surface of images by rejecting a traditional idea that images reflect reality. However, this form of analysis tends to emphasize the image itself as the most important site of meaning based on the assumption that the image itself is so powerful that it actually does something (e.g., Dyer's thesis of the star image's ability to resolve ideological tensions within society). Semiotics' focus on the power of individual images, thus, raises questions about the limitations of its method, which ignores other important sites of meaning (e.g., social practices and institutions that surround particular images).<sup>75</sup> This is why this dissertation also brings in the method of discourse analysis. According to Michel Foucault, discourse refers to groups of statements that produce particular ways to think about and talk about certain things, as well as our way of acting on the basis of that thinking. The strength of discourse analysis lies in its close attention to the web of intertextuality (i.e., the way meanings are connected to each other through diverse forms such as visual images, verbal texts,

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<sup>75</sup> Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials* (Sage Publications Ltd, 2001), 98.

practices of institutions, etc.) within a particular historical time.<sup>76</sup> Therefore, the method of discourse analysis in combination with semiotic analysis provides a useful tool for this dissertation to analyze the structured polysemy of the three Korean female film stars while focusing on the ways in which their star images and stardom articulate, dramatize, or play out the workings of dominant discourses of their time.

Considering the star image as an intertextual construct, this dissertation analyzes on-screen and off-screen personae of the three stars with special attention to how their off-screen images intersect with, negotiate, or reinforce their screen personae. To analyze on-screen images, I look at the character roles and types that each actress plays and the narrative treatment of these roles in different films. According to Ferdinand de Saussure, signs derive meaning by both what a specific sign is not and by its relation to other signs (i.e., its combination with other signs). Saussure explains the structural relations within a sign system in terms of two kinds of signs: paradigmatic and syntagmatic signs. Paradigmatic signs relate to what the signs are not, thereby producing meaning from a contrast with all other possible signs that are not chosen in the system. Syntagmatic signs relate to the combination of signs actually present, thus gaining meaning from the signs that surround them, or come before or after them in sequence.<sup>77</sup> It is important to identify both the paradigmatic and syntagmatic structures in the analysis of star texts. I intend to explore how specific character roles and types are chosen from the particular

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 140-141.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 78.

paradigm set and what values and meanings such choices signify. At the same time, I analyze syntagmatic structures by looking at the narrative structure of each film and a shared syntagm across different films and star images.

For the discussion of off-screen images, I analyze how each star was promoted outside of the film text itself through popular magazines, newspapers, tabloids, and other forms of media. In the process, I will discuss the ways in which the off-screen images of the three stars reinforce, negotiate, or contradict their typical on-screen personae. The primary emphasis is on the role of the three stars as social signs, which carry cultural meanings and ideological values of specific historical times. Therefore, my analysis of these stars goes beyond a pure structural analysis of the star text, which focuses on internal relations within the system of signs. This dissertation is more interested in the social aspect of signification and connotative meanings produced through culturally shared codes.

Since semiotic analysis primarily focuses on image and meaning production, there is little attention paid to how actual audiences make sense of images. Discourse analysis also tends to neglect the site of reception and thus fails to provide the intertextual connections in an empirically grounded way. Thus, empirical studies are needed to explore the questions of how actual audiences receive and interpret images, and how they bring in the cultural values and knowledge of dominant ideologies shared within society. Mainstream feminist film theories in the United States rely on a monolithic idea of the theoretical spectator, which assumes white middle-class First World women as the norm. I intend to discover how different groups of female

audiences interpret star images, believing that the ways in which they respond and relate to particular female stars can signify the complexities of these women's subject positions in relation to ideal femininity, which the dominant ideologies of the time attempt to construct.

My primary source of information about Korean and Korean-American female audiences' responses is focus group interviews. The focus group interview is a method of qualitative research where a group of interviewees are gathered and asked what they think of certain given topics. Unlike one-on-one interviews, focus group interviews take place in an interactive setting, in which interviewees are more inclined to exchange their ideas with other participants. Furthermore, unlike closed-ended questionnaires, in which a range of possible options is provided, focus group interviews encourage open-ended discussion, inviting respondents to voice their own personal responses.<sup>78</sup> The interactive setting and open-ended discussion have the advantage of allowing the interviewee a sense of spontaneity as well as a feeling of control in the context of the interview. New ideas or directions that the researcher may not have considered may be brought to the researcher's attention. Therefore, the focus group interview method utilizing open-ended questions is a valid approach for gaining access to the meanings that female audiences bring to their readings of specific stars in relation to their lived experiences and knowledge shaped in a particular social setting.

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<sup>78</sup> Shaun Moores, *Interpreting Audiences: The Ethnography of Media Consumption* (Sage Publications, 1993), 19-26.

Empirical studies utilizing the focus group interview method have demonstrated that audiences have various and often conflicting interpretations of the same media text. I will now move to a discussion of a few examples of these audience studies while focusing on their research methods and procedures. David Morley studied the viewers of a British nonfiction television program, *Nationwide* to find “the extent to which individual interpretation of programmes could be shown to vary systematically in relation to...sociocultural background.”<sup>79</sup> Morely organized focus groups with people of diverse social and economic classes and each group viewed two episodes, followed by a thirty-minute discussion. Morley’s approach to the interview process utilized open-ended questions that allowed for diverse responses.

David Buckingham also used the focus group interview method in his study of *EastEnders* youth audiences in 1987. Buckingham utilized open-ended discussion and noted that his intention was “to make these discussions as open-ended as possible and to avoid directing them towards particular issues.”<sup>80</sup> He began with preliminary questions focusing on the interviewees’ viewing habits and their favorite and least favorite characters, and this generated a free-flowing, unstructured discussion.

Elihu Katz and Tamar Liebes used a similar method and procedure using the focus group interview except that they brought together a much larger sample than Morley and Buckingham. They assembled ten focus groups, made up of various

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<sup>79</sup> David Morley, *The ‘Nationwide’ Audience* (British Film Institute, 1980), 56.

<sup>80</sup> David Buckingham, *Public Secrets: ‘EastEnders’ and Its Audiences* (British Film Institute, 1987), 158.

ethnic groups of Israelis (e.g., Israeli Arabs, Moroccan Jews, Russian Jews, Israeli kibbutz members, and Jewish Americans) living in Los Angeles. Each group viewed an episode of an American television program, *Dallas*, in the hosts' living room and then took part in a discussion, which generally lasted an hour, moving from relatively open to less-open questions. Katz and Liebes initiated the discussion by asking the participants to summarize the episode's plot that they had just watched together. They also asked the interviewees to complete a brief questionnaire concerning whether they normally watched the program alone or in a group and with whom they usually discussed the program.<sup>81</sup>

Jacqueline Bobo's study of African-American women's responses to the film, *The Color Purple* (1986), is another example of empirical audience research that investigates active audiences' diverse interpretations of a text. Bobo conducted two separate focus group interviews with African-American women in North Carolina. Each group viewed the film together while Bobo observed her respondents' reactions to particular scenes. Bobo, then, began interview sessions by raising questions of why interviewees responded to certain scenes in particular ways and how they related their own lived experiences to the film.<sup>82</sup>

These previous audience studies guide the formulation of this dissertation's research method and procedure. I assembled four groups of Korean and Korean-American women from different age and cultural backgrounds (six to seven women

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<sup>81</sup> Elihu Katz and Tamar Liebes, *The Export of Meaning: Cross-Cultural Readings of Dallas*. (Oxford University Press, 1990).

<sup>82</sup> Jacqueline Bobo, *Black Women as Cultural Readers* (Columbia University Press, 1995), 91-132.

in each group) in an effort to provide a cross-cultural analysis.<sup>83</sup> Group one consists of Korean-American middle-aged women living in Kansas who are married to Americans and have lived in the United States for a significant amount of time. Group two comprises Korean middle-aged women who live in Seoul, Korea and are married to Korean men. Group three consists of Korean-American young single females in their twenties and live in Kansas. Group four consists of Korean young single females in their twenties who live in Seoul, Korea.

The grounds for the organization of the four interview groups is based on the assumption that people tend to have different views and reactions in terms of their age, cultural identity, and life situation. The middle-aged women in groups one and two, born between 1945 and 1960,<sup>84</sup> share the experiences and/or memories of the Cold War and the forced modernization process under Korea's military dictatorship. Yet, my assumption is that they may have experienced the oppressive and gendered modernization process differently, depending on their geographical, cultural, and marital situations. As a result, these two groups of women (Korean-American and Korean women) may have different points-of-view about the popular representation

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<sup>83</sup> The selection and organization of these groups are not intended to make a claim about representative sampling. I do not intend to establish any theory of Korean female spectatorship or a systematic analysis of variations in interpretation. Relying on qualitative data gathered from the four focus groups, I intend to incorporate the interviewees' views with my own analysis in an effort to provide a more empirically grounded research.

<sup>84</sup> In 1945, Korea was emancipated from imperialist Japan. While the Korean people strived to rebuild their nation, the Korean War broke out in 1950. Since then the ideologies of the Cold War ideology and anti-communism were dominant in Korean society. In 1961, a military government came into power in South Korea and embarked on the modernization and industrialization processes while keeping a close relationship with the US as an ally. Thus, the years between 1945 and 1960 signify the beginning of the post-colonial era inflated with political ideological struggles in Korean society.



of women in Korean film. The other two groups of Korean-American and Korean young females grew up in a relatively abundant economic environment and politically open and democratic atmosphere. They were surrounded by Western culture, especially American culture and Hollywood movies, and as previously noted, their geographical locations, ethnicity, and cultural identities will impact their cultural attitude and perspectives.

At the same time, I intend to utilize more fluid and heterogeneous notions of non-Western, Third World women while challenging the ideological divide between the West (First World) and the East (Third World). As discussed above in the literature review section, Western feminist scholars have constructed a monolithic notion of Third World woman (i.e, poor, sexually constrained, domestic, tradition-bound, victimized, and so on). Scholarship (Western and Eastern intellectuals alike) continues to contribute to the idea of the East as existing before and outside the West. Thus, scholars seek to find an absolute difference from the West or the image of unspoiled native in Third World women's culture. The question, then, is whether this geographical and conceptual binary of the West and non-West is still valid for the study of post-colonial Korea given the long history of colonial domination and the spread of global capitalism. Drawing on Rey Chow's ideas, this dissertation takes up the theoretical and methodological position of a dialectic between "Korean" and "Western" (particularly, the United States). Accordingly, the composition of the four focus groups relies on the idea of the interconnectedness or interpenetration between "Korean" and "American." For instance, Korean-American women in groups one

and three live in the United States (i.e., the First World). They are minorities within American society and their hyphenated identity signifies the complexity of their diasporic subjectivity. Korean women in groups two and four are native or indigenous women in Korea (i.e., the Third World). They are not minorities in terms of their ethnicity and live in an already-Westernized context (not before or outside the West) in the metropolitan city of Seoul. However, as Third World feminists argue, they are doubly marginalized not only by an indigenous context but by an unequal structure of the world system as well.

These four groups of women provide valuable data in regards to their interpretations of the images of the three Korean female stars' images and their stardom. The procedure of the focus group interviews involved four separate interviews lasting about two and a half hours each. Two interviews were conducted in Seoul, Korea in July 2006 and two interviews were conducted in Lawrence, Kansas, USA in February 2007. I assembled clips from the films in which the three actresses starred and screened them before each interview. Before the interview sessions began, the interviewees completed a questionnaire regarding their demographic information and their familiarity with the stars.<sup>85</sup> Due to the fact that middle-aged women know little about Jun Ji-Hyun, who is in her twenties, the two interview sessions (groups one and two) focused on the star images of Choi Eun-Hee and Chang Mi-Hee. Likewise, young females are not familiar with the two stars from previous generations, Choi Eun-Hee and Chang Mi-Hee, so these two groups (groups three and

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<sup>85</sup> The questionnaire form used in the focus group interviews is located in appendix B.

four) focused on the star images of Jun Ji-Hyun. The demographic information along with brief descriptions of each participant in the four focus groups is provided below. While I have changed the names of the interviewees to protect anonymity, I have maintained the respondents' ethnicity that they self-reported in the questionnaire.

Table 1. Group One (Korean-American middle-aged women in Kansas)

Name	Age	Ethnicity	Job	Marital Status	Familiarity with Choi and Chang	The Year to come to USA
Ms. Smith	47	Korean	Research scientist	Married	She has seen <i>Mother and a Guest</i> (Choi), <i>Winter Woman</i> , <i>Deep Blue Night</i> (Chang)	1986
Ms. Brown	54	Korean-American	Social worker	Married	Not familiar with the stars but read some of the novels on which the films were based.	1977
Ms. Davis	62	Korean	Writer/ College instructor	Married	She has seen Choi's films and is familiar with Chang.	1973
Ms. Evans	59	Korean	Store manager	Married	She recognizes these stars but is not sure what films she saw.	1983
Ms. Allen	60	Korean	Housewife	Married	She has only seen Choi's films but cannot recall which films she saw.	1978
Ms. Green	56	Korean	College instructor	Married	She has seen Choi's films but cannot recall the details. She has heard about the kidnapping of Choi by North Korea.	1977
Ms. Taylor	52	Korean-American	Research Associate	Married	She has heard about Choi and Chang.	1970

Table 2. Group Two (Korean middle-aged women in Korea)

Name	Age	Ethnicity	Job	Marital Status	Choi's and Chang's films they have seen	Other
Ms. Kim	54	Korean	College instructor	Separated	<i>Mother and a Guest, Romance Gray, Evergreen Tree</i> (Choi)	She has also seen TV soap operas in which Chang starred. She saw Choi and Chang in person as well.
					<i>Deep Blue Night, Flower at the Equator, Home of Stars II</i> (Chang)	
Ms. Lee	53	Korean	Housewife	Married	<i>Mother and a Guest, Flower in Hell</i> (Choi)	She remembers seeing Choi on the theatrical stage. She also saw Choi in person.
					<i>Night Market, Deep Blue Night, Hwang Jin-ie</i> (Chang)	
Ms. Kang	49	Korean	Restaurant owner	Married	<i>Mother and a Guest, Romance Papa, Romance Gray</i> (Choi)	
					<i>Night Market, Deep Blue Night</i> (Chang)	
Ms. Hong	62	Korean	Housewife	Married	<i>Mother and a Guest, Romance Papa, Evergreen Tree</i> (Choi)	
					<i>Winter Woman, Deep Blue Night, Flower at the Equator</i> (Chang)	
Ms. Shin	52	Korean	Music teacher	Married	<i>Mother and a Guest, Flower in Hell</i> (Choi)	She is also familiar with TV soap operas and commercials in which Chang starred.
					<i>Winter Woman, Deep Blue Night, Hwang Jin-ie</i> (Chang)	
Ms. Han	60	Korean	Housewife	Married	<i>Mother and a Guest, Romance Gray, Rice</i> (Choi)	
					<i>Winter Woman, Flower at the Equator, Deep Blue Night</i> (Chang)	

Table 3. Group Three (Korean-American young females in Kansas)

Name	Age	Ethnicity	Job	Marital Status	Familiarity with Jun	Birth Place & Language environment
Amy	25	Korean-American	Hair stylist	Single	Not familiar	She was adopted when she was two years old. She does not speak Korean.
Jennifer	20	Korean/ Filipino/ Mexican – American	College student/ Part-time jobs	Single	Not familiar	She was born in the USA. She is in a Korean language class at KU and her mother is Korean.
Carrie	21	Korean	College student/ research assistant	Single	Not familiar	She was adopted when she was two and a half years old. She does not speak Korean.
Kate	20	Half Korean	College student	Single	She has seen <i>My Sassy Girl</i> .	She was born in the USA. She is in a Korean language class at KU and her mother is Korean.
Helen	20	Korean	College student	Single	She has seen <i>My Sassy Girl</i> , <i>Windstruck</i> , and <i>Daisy</i>	She was born in the USA. She is from a Korean family and speaks Korean.
Elaine	20	Asian/ Caucasian	College student	Single	She has heard of Jun.	She was born in the USA. She is in a Korean language class at KU and her mother is Korean.

Table 4. Group Four (Korean young females in Korea)

Name	Age	Ethnicity	Job	Marital Status	Jun's films they have seen	Familiarity with Jun's off-screen images
Bo-Yeon	22	Korean	College student	Single	<i>White Valentine, Il Mare, My Sassy Girl, Windstruck, The Uninvited</i>	She has also seen TV soap operas and commercials in which Jun starred. She has read articles about Jun in newspapers and magazines.
Jung-Mi	21	Korean	College student	Single	<i>My Sassy Girl, Windstruck, The Uninvited</i>	Same as above
Hyun-Su	21	Korean	College student	Single	<i>Il Mare, My Sassy Girl, Windstruck</i>	Same as above
Sung-Ah	23	Korean	College student	Single	<i>My Sassy Girl, Windstruck, The Uninvited, Daisy</i>	Same as above
Yu-Mi	21	Korean	College student	Single	<i>Il Mare, My Sassy Girl, Windstruck, The Uninvited, Daisy</i>	Same as above
Tae-Hee	21	Korean	College student	Single	<i>Il Mare, My Sassy Girl, Windstruck, The Uninvited</i>	Same as above

### **III. Choi Eun-Hee (1930- ): A Devoted Mother in a Divided Nation**

This chapter focuses on the discourses around the images of a Korean female film star, Choi Eun-Hee, in order to explore how her star images and stardom function in the production and circulation of meanings, identities, desires, and ideologies in post-colonial Korean society. Choi Eun-Hee, whose screen persona embodies the notion of the traditional Korean mother, emerged as a star in the late 1950s and became one of the most popular actresses in Korea during the golden age of Korean cinema (1960s). The period of her stardom coincides with the time when the South Korean government strived to rebuild the nation after the Korean War (1950-1953) through modernization and industrialization processes while keeping a close relationship with the United States and against North Korea. Choi Eun-Hee's star persona is most strongly associated with a devoted and strong mother and this character type is idealized in her films in the context of national reconstruction, particularly in the construction of a modern, anti-communist Korean identity during the post-Korean War era.

South Korean society during the postwar era (especially in the late 1950s) was plagued by political turmoil under the leadership of the first President, Syngman Rhee, as he became an increasingly autocratic ruler seeking to expand and cement his control of the government. A series of student demonstrations and protests against the Rhee regime broke out in 1960, which soon led to the resignation of Rhee. The Second Republic was established in 1960 in the form of a cabinet system instead of a

presidential system. As a strongly democratic and leftist government, the Second Republic carried out a number of anti-corruption measures while purging and replacing anti-democratic military and police officials; however, its democratic reforms and cleanup measures ended up creating social and economic chaos.<sup>1</sup>

A military coup led by General Park Chung-Hee overthrew the Second Republic in 1961 due to the belief that the current situation of the country would collapse into communism. Park became President in 1963 and began rigorous economic development projects while also strengthening national security against North Korea in an effort to construct South Korea as a militarily strong and wealthy modern state. To this end, the Park regime (the Third Republic, 1963-1972; the Fourth Republic, 1972-1979) continued its close ties with the United States as an ally. Even though Park's military rule claimed to stand for anti-colonial nationalism, it continued to receive large amounts of aid from the United States; thus, contributing to the United States' neo-colonial domination and South Korea's dependent economy. Moreover, Park went ahead with the normalization of relations with Japan in 1965 regardless of general sentiments against this act. The South Korean economy indeed grew rapidly under Park's leadership relying on the influx of foreign capital from the United States and Japan.<sup>2</sup> However, underlying this strict nationalist modernization project was Park Chung-Hee's drive to imitate and emulate the militaristic industrial

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<sup>1</sup> Michael E. Robinson, *Korea's Twentieth Century Odyssey: A Short History* (University of Hawaii Press, 2007), 122-127.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 127-135.



capitalism of Meiji Japan (1868-1912).<sup>3</sup> As a result, during the postwar era South Korea experienced the direct installation of both Japanese industrial capitalism and the U.S. military and economic apparatus while never having an opportunity to decolonize in a true sense.

Choi Eun-Hee rose to stardom in this turbulent era of national reconstruction and the beginning of Park's eighteen-year military dictatorship (from the military coup he led in 1961 until his assassination in 1979); consequently the structured polysemy of Choi's star images lies in a complex ideological discursive system where the processes of modernization, decolonization, and re-colonization were superimposed onto the discourses of the Cold War and anti-communism. Choi starred in over one hundred films throughout her career, the majority of which were melodramas, and the character roles and types that Choi played encompass a wide spectrum of femininity. In the course of her career, she portrayed roles that ranged from a war widow to a mistress, from a traditional mother to an educated career woman, and from a "new woman" during the Japanese colonial era to "yanggongju," a prostitute who works for American GIs. This chapter examines the social, economic, and historical factors operating behind Choi Eun-Hee's star images and focuses on the films that created and consolidated her stardom between the late 1950s and the mid 1960s.

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<sup>3</sup> The Meiji Restoration refers to a chain of events that took place in 1868 in Japan. Its goal was to strengthen Japan under the threat of Western imperialism. A new centralized government was established replacing the old feudal order while restoring power to the emperor, who functioned as the source of legitimacy and a symbol of continuity with the past. Due to the accelerated processes of modernization and industrialization during the Meiji era (1868-1912), Japan emerged as a world power in the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## **“Choi Eun-Hee Embodies *Our Mother*”:**

### **Between the Traditional and the Modern**

Despite the diverse character types Choi Eun-Hee portrayed, South Korean audiences most strongly associate her with the role of a devoted wife and mother who is dedicated to her family and who values chastity and self-sacrifice at the expense of her own happiness. Her typical on-screen persona is particularly tied to the image of a young widow who abides by traditional rules and mores. Choi portrays a traditional woman type in many of her films, but *Dongsimcho* [*Tongsimch'o*] (1959) and *Mother and a Guest* [*Sarangbang Sonnimgwa Ŏmōni*] (1961) are the two films that primarily contributed to the construction of Choi's star persona as a devoted wife/widow while transforming Choi into a major star during the late 1950s and early 1960s.

The themes of “resignation and submission” to traditions are apparent in both films, *Dongsimcho* and *Mother and a Guest*.<sup>4</sup> The story of *Dongsimcho* centers around a war widow, Lee, who lost her husband in the Korean War. Left alone with her daughter, Lee runs a dressmaking shop, but her shop soon runs into debt. She meets Kim, an executive director of a publishing company, who helps her pay off the debt. Lee falls in love with Kim; however, Kim has a fiancé whose father is his boss. Even though Lee and Kim truly love each other, she finally decides to leave him wishing for his happiness. When Kim realizes that she is leaving, he hurries to the

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<sup>4</sup> Kwak Hyun-Ja, A Widow and An Yanggongju, in Choo You-Shin et al. eds., *Hanguok Yŏnghwawa Kŭndaesŏng* (Sodo, 2005), 134.

train station, but it is too late. The film ends with Kim helplessly watching the train pull away.

In *Mother and a Guest*, Choi Eun-Hee plays a young widow, whose husband has died before the birth of her daughter and who now lives in the countryside with her daughter. Set in the 1930s, the story is told through the viewpoint of her six-year-old daughter, Ok-Hee. One day, a friend of her deceased husband comes to live with her and her daughter as a guest in the house after he finds a job as a schoolteacher in the town. Ok-Hee likes the guest very much as if he were her father. The mother and the guest gradually fall in love, but they never express their feelings because of the social mores of the time, which forbids widow's remarrying. The final scene of the film shows the guest leaving the town on a train while the mother looks at the train from a distance until it disappears.

The widow/mother that Choi portrays in these two films represents the traditional Korean woman who sacrifices herself, represses her desire, and ultimately succumbs to the neo-Confucian rule of "one husband to the last" {Ilbujongsa}.<sup>5</sup> Neo-Confucianism (developed by Zhu Xi during the Song dynasty in China) is the term used to distinguish this belief system from the earlier form of Confucianism by Confucius and Mencius. It was during the Chosŏn dynasty (1392-1910) in Korea when neo-Confucianism was established as a state ideology and code of conduct for both men and women. The ideology of neo-Confucianism dictates that a wife should obey her husband. She is not supposed to remarry if she is widowed and should

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 133-134.

remain chaste and continue to serve her roles as a mother and daughter-in-law. Thus, the traditional widow/mother type that Choi portrays chooses to leave or to be left behind at the narrative's conclusion while repressing her romantic feelings for another man. The widow character type is constructed as a traditional Korean woman in these films not only through the narrative but visually as well. For instance, Choi's character wears a traditional Korean dress with her hair up in a chignon, presenting a drastic contrast to the representation of other women in the films. Most of the female characters in Choi's films wear western style clothes and high-heel shoes with bobbed hair.

The interviewees in group one (Korean-American middle-aged women) spoke about Choi's typical image in terms of the traditional Korean mother/widow focusing on her chaste and self-sacrificial image. For instance, Ms. Smith, who is a research scientist, said:

"I cannot think of any actress other than Choi Eun-Hee that *truly*<sup>6</sup> represents a Korean mother. I remember her image as wearing a 'Hanbok' (Korean traditional dress) very neatly and being modest and self-effacing in terms of behavior. And her best interest is always in her family and children (in the films)."

Ms. Davis, a writer and college instructor, concurred while responding to the scene screened during the interview:

"I think that mother image in that film (*Mother and a Guest*) is the most...typical image of Choi....In the scene where she first meets the guest, when her brother introduces the guest to her, she blushes a little bit and hides behind her mother-in-law. That means she kind of likes [the guest] but she

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<sup>6</sup> The use of italics here indicates some form of special emphasis (e.g., tonal inflections) utilized by the respondent. The usage of italics in the transcripts hereafter, with the exception of film titles, represents emphasis by the respondent.

has to remain chaste to her (deceased) husband. You know, a remarriage of a widow was unthinkable at that time. [Choi represents] a traditional woman type in Korea.”

The Korean middle-aged women in group two in general also interpreted Choi’s image as a traditional Korean woman. Ms. Han, a Korean housewife, pointed to the role of Choi’s character in *Mother and a Guest* within a traditional extended family:

“To me, she represents a mother and daughter-in-law rather than a wife in a traditional sense, I mean, within a traditional family. She is a widow (in *Mother and a Guest*) so, there is no husband in the story. Her life is *completely* dedicated to her husband’s family...(like) taking care of the household, raising the children, and serving her parents-in-law.”

Ms. Shin, who is a music teacher, responded in a similar way while relating Choi’s image to the changes in Korean society: “I think she represents the Korean tradition or custom during the time of extreme social change....Western style clothes had already become everyday attire in the 1950s and 1960s....Choi embodies a traditional Korean woman in the midst of westernization or modernization.”

Despite the fact that the interviewees primarily associate Choi Eun-Hee with the role and image of a traditional woman, Choi’s characters often demonstrate aspects of the modern woman in the two films discussed above. For instance, Choi’s character goes to the movie theater for a date and owns a shop that makes western style dresses in *Dongsimcho*. Both the movie theater and the dressmaking shop were considered modern spaces during the 1950s and 1960s. In *Mother and a Guest*, Choi’s character goes to church and plays the piano. The props she utilizes include a bible and a sunshade umbrella, which are often associated with a modern or Western

culture.<sup>7</sup> The modern sensibility that Choi's characters display, in juxtaposition with neo-Confucian rules and mores, signifies the clash of traditional values with the new emerging values of modern culture. It is interesting that the narrative endings of both films involve the visual image of a departing train (the train can be viewed as a symbol of modern technology within the context of the films) vis-à-vis Choi's character's resignation and submission to the neo-Confucian tradition of "one husband to the last." These endings function to reinforce the virtue of female chastity and sacrifice that Korean society has traditionally upheld while also reconstructing women's social position and subjectivity during the time of rapid modernization and ideological complication.

As the Korean film scholar, Soyoung Kim, correctly observes the melodrama, which was the major film genre during the 1950s and the 1960s in Korea, emerged as a site of contestation where the ideology of neo-Confucianism and the cultural values of modern society were contradicted and negotiated.<sup>8</sup> It is significant to note that Choi's characters in such melodramas as *Dongsimcho* and *Mother and a Guest* serve a vital role in revealing the repressive nature of the patriarchal discourse of neo-Confucianism. In other words, while the melodramatic endings of *Dongsimcho* and *Mother and a Guest* strive to reinforce the neo-Confucian social order, in which a remarriage of a widow is strictly tabooed, there are the significant moments in the films that expose contradictions within the traditional social mores of the time. In

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>8</sup> Soyoung Kim, *Cinema, Technomunhwaŭi Purŭn Kkot* (Yŏlhwadang, 1996), 193.

*Dongsimcho*, for instance, Lee's daughter wants her mother to marry Kim and shouts at a person who is against her mother's remarriage, "after all the years of loneliness and chastity, my mother deserves to be happy. Who made the law that she should not pursue her own happiness?" (Shin Sang-Ok, 1959).

The sentiment that is conveyed in Lee's daughter's emotional outburst is echoed in *Mother and a Guest*. When the brother of Choi's character visits the mother-in-law to seek permission to get Choi's character married again, the mother-in-law, who is also a widow, fiercely rejects the idea. However, she changes her mind a few days later and suggests Choi's character remarry. In this scene, the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law (Choi's character) cry in sorrow together while sharing their repressed emotions and desires as widows. Choi's character finally decides to keep her chastity and remain a widow as many other widows did in Korea at that time. However, what is interesting in this scene is not so much Choi's final decision to sacrifice herself in the service of the ideology of female chastity as the moment that reveals the oppressive nature of life that Korean women have to endure in the name of social mores and tradition.<sup>9</sup>

The interviewees in group two (Korean middle-aged women) believed that the widow/mother character type greatly appealed to Korean female audiences during the late 1950s and the 1960s, who were also experiencing the clash of traditional values with the emerging values of modern culture. As Ms. Lee, a Korean housewife and mother in group two, put it:

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<sup>9</sup> Kwak Hyun-Ja, 136.

“It was easy to identify with Choi’s character because our mothers and we were all going through the fast social changes at that time....The women’s lives were extremely complicated and difficult...during the time of modernization....The society was rapidly changing into a modern society but women’s lives were mostly...swayed by the traditional values from the pre-modern time. I think Choi’s character and her films strongly appealed to the (Korean) female audiences at that time because we witnessed so many women who had no choice but to abide by the tradition...because of social constraints.”

Ms. Kang, who runs a Korean restaurant in Seoul, Korea, expressed her view in a similar fashion:

“The scene where Choi’s character and her mother-in-law cried out loud holding their hands (in *Mother and a Guest*) made my eyes teary...even when I already saw the film....Choi’s films have strong emotional appeals to Korean women because they are the stories of *our mothers* who raised us in the *grueling time* of...fast modernization and westernization.”

Even though Choi epitomizes the idea of a non-Western, Third World woman who is tradition-bound, sexually constrained, domestic, and victimized, the interviewees in both groups one and two provided positive responses to this star while interpreting her as a strong and outstanding woman. Ms. Hong, a Korean housewife and mother in group two regarded Choi’s image as a strong woman who survived difficult times:

“There were *so many* widows and single mothers after the Korean War and during the 1960s. Choi Eun-Hee embodies *our mother* during those difficult times. We were *so poor*...with *so many changes and events*. Choi represents a strong woman who raised children by herself, survived all the hardships, and restored her family at that time.”

Ms. Kim, a college instructor in Korea, in the same group talked about Choi’s stardom based on a similar reasoning:

“There are aspects of pain and sacrifice on the part of women in Choi’s films, but they are also the stories of a *strong woman*....the kinds of stories that empower us and we can easily relate to....I think Choi Eun-Hee became a popular star because she portrayed the role of a woman really well...in the



context of conflicts between traditional and modern values....She embodies a strong, outstanding woman.”

Ms. Allen, Ms. Evans, and Ms. Davis in group one (Korean-American middle-aged women) similarly expressed positive views of Choi interpreting her image as a strong woman and mother in the particular social context of postwar Korea:

**Ms. Allen:** Korean women, especially after the Korean war, were caught between their role as mothers and their desires as women...as individuals....Choi Eun-Hee’s performance reflect those conflicting emotions very well. But I think of her more along the lines of a strong mother than a victim...rather than a victimized, helpless woman.

**Ms. Evans:** I understand her chastity in relation to (the notion of) endurance, persistence, or power. She is a true survivor and a *manly woman* {yŏjangbu}....She is a real woman.

**Ms. Davis:** I remember crying while watching *Mother and a Guest* when I was young...in Korea. Now seeing it (the scenes from the film) again, I feel that I can understand her position better because I am a mother myself....Women were not allowed to live their lives as they wished....Choi Eun-Hee represents the Korean women who overcame difficulties and survived.

The responses from the interviewees in groups one and two demonstrate that the widow/mother type that Choi Eun-Hee portrays represents the predicaments of Korean women who were caught between the traditional values that dictated their social positions and the forces of modernization and modern cultural values that were rapidly spreading during the 1950s and 1960s. However, the interviewees provided positive responses to this star while interpreting her images as an embodiment of a strong and outstanding woman, not in terms of the negative stereotype of the Third World woman that Western scholarship has constructed. These positive evaluations were based on their shared experience or memory of women’s submission to the neo-

Confucian ideology during the time of rapid modernization as well as their subject positions as mothers and wives.

Yet, the interviewees' understanding of Choi's star images as a strong woman is more intrinsically implicated in the popular discourses formulated through novels, films, and television. The notion of a devoted and strong mother, who manages a large extended family and revives its declining fortunes, remains one of the most powerful and popular tropes held by South Koreans, even today. A number of popular novels such as *The Land* [*T'oji*] (Park Kyong-Ri, 1973), *Spirit Fire* [*Honbul*] (Choi Myong-Hee, 1983), *Surado* (Kim Chong-Han, 1988) utilize mothers of immense insight, ability and devotion as central characters (often in the absence of men) while dramatizing and glorifying their lifelong sacrifice, endurance and nurturing.<sup>10</sup> These novels were commercially and critically successful and were written by both male and female writers. *The Land* has been made into a television series numerous times and other TV dramas and films often utilize the female character whose motherly sacrifice, endurance, and persistence eventually reward her with her family's survival and prosperity. *Mother and a Guest*, which is commonly regarded as Choi's most representative film, is based on a short novel by the same title by Choo Yo-Sup (1935). The short novel, *Mother and a Guest*, is often included

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<sup>10</sup> Cho Haejoang, Living with Conflicting Subjectivities: Mother, Motherly Wife, and Sexy Woman in the Transition From Colonial-modern to Postmodern Korea, in Laurel Kendall ed., *Under Construction: The Gendering of Modernity, Class, and Consumption in the Republic of Korea*, (University of Hawaii Press, 2002), 171.

in middle-school textbooks in South Korea. The director, Shin Sang-Ok,<sup>11</sup> made this novel into a film and this film has repeatedly been aired on television during holiday seasons in Korea and it is considered a Korean classic in the history of Korean cinema.

Within the popular discourses of a strong Korean mother, a woman who assumes rough, assertive, and even masculine roles as the head of the family is not stigmatized, but rather is recognized and valorized. Even though Choi Eun-Hee does not necessarily take up the masculine role in the two films, *Dongsimcho* and *Mother and a Guest*, the interviewees provided positive responses to Choi connecting her star images and stardom to larger discourses of the strong Korean mother. As Ms. Hong's response in group two indicates, "Choi Eun-Hee embodies our mother," (i.e., a strong woman who survived historically grueling times). The typical portrait of "our mother" in the modern South Korean context even enabled the use of the contradictory term, "manly woman" (Ms. Evans) when discussing Choi's typical image as a traditional Korean mother. As Ms. Evans' response in group one indicates, this "manly woman" came to mean "a real woman;" therefore, resulting in the respondents' positive evaluations of the star. How, then, can we understand these responses in which the "traditional" woman translates into the image of a "strong" and "outstanding" woman? Moreover, how are the neo-Confucian virtues of female chastity, devotion, and sacrifice connected to the concept of "manliness?" In the

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<sup>11</sup> Shin Sang-Ok, Choi Eun-Hee's husband, was the leading figure during the golden age of Korean cinema in the 1960s.

following section, I will discuss the social and historical factors operating behind the trope of a traditional, yet strong, Korean mother.

### **The Strong Korean Mother:**

#### **Between the National, the Colonial, and the Modern**

Given the canonic status of the film, *Mother and a Guest*, it is perhaps no wonder that the interviewees primarily identify with Choi as the traditional mother type. However, their responses also suggest that star images are not natural but socially formulated to serve particular needs. The respondents in both groups one and two during the focus group interviews discussed the ideal female type that centered around Choi's typical image (i.e., chaste and dutiful wife/mother) as well as the workings of the male-dominant ideology underlying such idealization. Ms. Davis in group one, who earlier in the interview described Choi as an embodiment of the Korean woman "who overcame difficulties and survived," pointed to the controlling male desire underneath Choi's image of the seemingly strong woman:

"Choi Eun-Hee's films...are about the stories of a strong woman, but in fact, they are about male desire in the end. In *Mother and a Guest*, the father character, the husband of Choi's character is absent, but he still exists...invisibly. Even when he is dead, the husband is still controlling Choi's [character's] life and desire."

Ms. Evans responded to Ms. Davis' observation, saying, "so, she gives up her desire over her dead husband (laughs)." While both Ms. Brown and Ms. Taylor in group one noted that Choi represented an ideal wife and mother, Ms. Green, a college instructor in Kansas, exhibited a critical tone in her response emphasizing the proper

role that such an ideal woman was supposed to play. According to Ms. Green, “Choi Eun-Hee represents an ideal woman *for men* at that time. Speaking of her typical role in the films, she portrays a wife, I mean, a widow, and mother, and daughter-in-law in a family. So, she is *only* meaningful within a family.”

The responses from the Korean middle-aged women in group two were similar to those of the Korean-American middle-aged women in group one discussed above. These responses from group two include: “I think Choi Eun-Hee represents an idealized and desirable female” (Ms. Lee); “her life is *completely* dedicated to her husband’s family...[like] taking care of the household, raising the children, and serving her parents-in-law” (Ms. Han); “the image of Choi [in *Mother and a Guest*] portrays an ideal woman from the point-of-view of the male character, or from the point-of-view of Korean society at that time” (Ms. Kim). Thus, the image of the loyal and dutiful wife/mother in Choi’s films is seen to be idealized while serving the male desire or the values of patriarchal Korean society. Also, such an idealization confines her role to that of a wife, mother, and daughter-in-law and denies sexuality for Choi’s character in the two films (*Dongsimcho* and *Mother and a Guest*). As Ms. Kang, a restaurant owner in Korea, observed, “It seems like...Choi can control her sexual desire, or it is almost like she has no sexual desire at all.”

Bryan Turner’s theory of the capitalist body informs the notion of the asexual wife/mother type that post-war Korean society has sought to idealize. Turner maintains in his book, *The Body and Society: Explorations in Social Theory* (1996), that the notion of a desiring female body under capitalism has changed from a

“reproductive body” in traditional, pre-industrial society, to a “labouring body” in the industrial period, and finally to a “consuming body” in the post-industrial stage.<sup>12</sup>

Choi’s asexual body, along with her role inscribed by traditional family values, corresponds to the idea of a desiring female body in the pre-industrial period. The primary utility of Choi’s body lies with its reproductive and nurturing function (e.g., bearing and raising children, looking after household matters) so that the male family line can be continued and maintained. Why, then, does the notion of the ideal female type resort to the traditional wife and mother during the time of intense modernization and industrialization? What social, economic, or cultural factors can explain this regressive movement toward the past, returning to the traditional conception of female ideal when Korean society already began the processes of modernization and industrialization?

According to Seungsook Moon, neo-Confucianism came to stand for essential “Koreanness” and was quickly embraced as the authentic culture of Korea in the process of modernization.<sup>13</sup> Enforced modernization began during the Japanese occupation (1910-1945), transforming Korea from a traditional agrarian kingdom into an industrial, modern society. The ideology of neo-Confucianism was both expanded and supplanted during this colonial era while Korean people were simultaneously colonized and modernized. After liberation in 1945, the search for national identity

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<sup>12</sup> Bryan Turner, *The Body and Society: Explorations in Social Theory* (Sage, 1996), 3-5.

<sup>13</sup> For the issues of Korean nationalism and its implications for gender hierarchy in contemporary Korea, see Seungsook Moon, *Begetting the Nation: The Androcentric Discourse of National History and Tradition in South Korea*, in Elaine Kim and Chungmoo Choi, eds., *Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism* (Routledge, 1998), 33-66.

became a vital part of Korea's post-colonial project of national reconstruction. As the Korean War (1950-1953) resulted in the division of the country, creating two separate modern, national identities in the North (proletarian) and the South (capitalist), the South Korean government utilized neo-Confucian principles to create a South Korean identity and rivalry with North Korea. In other words, the neo-Confucian tradition has been at the center of South Korea's master narrative of national unity and true Korean collective identity in an effort to present South Korea as the only legitimate nation-state in the Korean peninsular.

Moreover, women played a vital role as anchors of traditional culture and symbols of resistance to foreign intrusion while South Korean society in the postwar era underwent a radical transition according to a new world order with new standards (e.g., capitalist standards) and goals (e.g., economic development and industrialization).<sup>14</sup> Choi's reproductive and nurturing body, which was constituted as a desiring body in the pre-modern era, stood as a traditional reference that functioned to reconstruct the concept of authentic "Koreanness" and secure the cultural identity of Korean people who felt displaced from the past in this era of shifting identities and social values. Therefore, the formulation of gender relations and the proper places of women in this modern Korean nation were more intrinsically connected to women's position within the patriarchal family inscribed by the ideology of pre-modern neo-Confucianism.

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<sup>14</sup> Diane M. Hoffman, "Blurred Genders: The Cultural Construction of Male and Female in South Korea," *Korean Studies* 19 (1995), 118.

As the interviewees (particularly Ms. Green in group one and Ms. Han in group two) correctly observed, the Korean patriarchal system traditionally defined women's responsibilities in terms of their roles as wives, mothers, and daughters-in-law. The idea that women's existence is only meaningful within a family originates from Confucian patriarchy. Confucian patriarchy centers on "the three subordinations" which dictate that a girl should obey her father, husband, and eldest son.<sup>15</sup> This type of attitude was largely promoted and practiced in pre-modern Korean society; however, it was not until the Chosŏn dynasty (1392-1910) when it was made the absolute code of conduct for women after neo-Confucianism was adopted as a state ideology. Neo-Confucianism incorporated the discourse of *yin* and *yang*, which were paired complementary opposites whose interactions kept the world in balance. *Yin* is associated with the feminine, the passive, the negative, and the weak while *yang* is associated with the opposite qualities and forces (i.e., the masculine, the active, the positive, the strong). Neo-Confucian scholars created a hierarchical gender relation based on this "natural order of things" and situated *yang*, i.e., men, as the dominant and more important gender.

I argue that the earlier form of Confucianism did not impose this sort of strict gendered hierarchy although it planted seeds for hierarchical gender relationships by attempting to find a way to establish social order and harmony. Confucianism was fundamentally concerned with moral principles and ethical virtues. For instance,

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<sup>15</sup> Women were expected to obey their fathers before marriage. After marriage women were expected to obey their husbands. Women were not supposed to remarry, if they were widowed, and they were expected to abide by their eldest sons' authority.



Confucianism's central ethical tradition of "the Five Relations" defined the proper positions, duties, and responsibilities of individuals within the social network and moral fabric of human relationship. "The Five Relations" were relations between ruler and minister, between parent and child, between husband and wife, between elder and younger, and between friends. In the Confucian view, these relations functioned to regulate and sustain the social order and human existence in harmony.<sup>16</sup> Within this network of human moral relations, Confucian ethics defined the ruler as the mainstay ("the main ropes of a net") of the minister, the parent as the mainstay of the child, the husband as the mainstay of the wife, and the elder as the mainstay of the younger.<sup>17</sup> As the mainstay of the other individuals, the ruler, the parent, and the husband were required to cultivate themselves and fulfill their responsibilities so that they could set up moral examples that the minister, child, wife, and younger individual would follow. In other words, stricter and heavier moral principles were imposed on the part of the mainstay (e.g., ruler, parent, husband, elder) in earlier Confucian practices.

However, later scholars of neo-Confucianism (re-)interpreted the idea of the mainstay along the lines of more important and superior beings based on the yin/yang discourse while constructing higher and lower positions within the government, the

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<sup>16</sup> W. Theodore DeBary et al., *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, Vol 1. (Columbia University Press, 1960), 336-337.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 345

family, and society. As a result, neo-Confucian ethics essentialized women's inferiority and low social position and thus justified their subordination to men.<sup>18</sup>

Neo-Confucianism made especially heavy demands on women, especially women of the *yangban* (gentry) family, in terms of their morality. *Yangban* refers to the ruling elite or the scholar-bureaucratic class that consisted of (neo-)Confucian scholars and officials and their family members. This aristocracy originated from the Koryŏ dynasty (918-1392) and emerged as a powerful social class during the neo-Confucian Chosŏn dynasty. A *yangban* wife was required to be modest and to help everyone in the family live up to certain moral principles. The home was the domain of the woman while a man was expected to handle public affairs and interact with the world at large in the *yangban* family. These gender distinctions were set up as a fixed, ahistorical model for gender relations. The most desirable qualities for women were obedience, chastity, and fidelity. A clear distinction based on these ideas was drawn between virtuous women (who were obedient, chaste, and loyal to her father, husband, and son) and immoral women (who did not measure up to such qualities).<sup>19</sup> Choi Eun-Hee in the two films, *Dongsimcho* and *Mother and a Guest*, precisely portrays the ideal of a wife, mother, and daughter-in-law within the *yangban* family both in terms of the narrative (e.g., Choi's character's submission to the neo-Confucian ideology of female chastity, raising her daughter and serving her mother-in-law) and visual images (e.g., her obedient and self-effacing attitude, submissive

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<sup>18</sup> Kim Mi-Young, *Yugyomunhwawa Yŏsŏng* [*Confucian Culture and Women*] (Salim, 2004), 24-31.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

posture and demeanor, and the wearing of a *hanbok* with her hair up in a chignon). Choi's image as a *yangban* woman in these two films functions as a symbol of authentic Korean culture (i.e., before the colonization, modernization, and national partition) during the time of rapid modernization and industrialization.

Yet, it is important to note that the interviewees in both groups one (Korean-American middle-aged women) and two (Korean middle-aged women) referred to the specific phrase of the "wise mother, good wife" {hyŏnmoyangch'ŏ} in measuring a female ideal type in relation to Choi's star persona. For instance, Ms. Taylor, a Korean-American research associate in group one, observed that "Choi Eun-Hee portrays a loyal wife, or the so-called *wise mother, good wife* type." Ms. Brown, a Korean-American social worker in the same group, also noted that "Choi is valorized as a 'wise mother, good wife.'" The Korean middle-aged women in group two often referred to the notion of "wise mother, good wife" when discussing the ideal female type within the patriarchal Korean society. Ms. Kim, a college instructor in Korea, asked the interviewer during the interview:

"Do you know the phrase, a 'wise mother, good wife'? Choi Eun-Hee exactly embodies that type. At that time, being a good wife meant...the role of a wife was to raise the children, be loyal to the in-laws, and preserve the family rather than just serving her husband. That was an ideal wife and mother."

The "good wife, wise mother" ideal promulgated in Japan as a way to mobilize women into the service of the state during a period of intense militarization, industrialization, and empire-building in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The implementation of Japan's civil code in 1898 reformulated the patriarchal family and its relation to the state, encouraging feminine virtues in

household and emphasizing the reproductive labor of women as a civil service to the nation. Deliberate national gender policies persisted in modern Japan while constructing the “good wife, wise motherhood” as the political obligation of Japanese women during its colonial expansion into Korea, China, and eventually throughout the Asian Pacific.<sup>20</sup>

The “good wife, wise mother” ideology was then adopted by the Japanese colonial government in order to establish Korean households as the base unit of the Japanese empire during the 1930s. However, the order of words was switched to “wise mother, good wife” instead of “good wife, wise mother” while emphasizing and prioritizing the role of mothers over that of wives in the colonial Korean context. Men or husbands were either deceased or absent in many Korean households during the 1930s due to the forced recruitment of Korean men by the Japanese to labor in factories and mines, or to fight in the Pacific War (1937-1945) as well as the imprisonment and execution of Korean men because of their involvement with Korea’s independence movements. Given the absence of husbands in the Korean household, the role of the Korean mother was especially crucial from the standpoint of the Japanese colonial government, which was to raise their children (especially sons) to be successful and loyal citizens of the Japanese empire.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Youn Taek-Lim, *Hangukūi Mosōng* [*Korean Motherhood*] (Chisikmadang, 2001), 42.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 43-44.

At the same time, Korean political leadership also embraced this ideology of “wise mother, good wife” during the Japanese colonial era (especially the 1930s).<sup>22</sup> The goal of women’s education during this period was to instruct women on how to maintain and preserve the family as a unit and establish the home as a secure place to raise and nurture their children so that their off-spring can grow up to serve the Korean nation. In South Korea after the Korean War, the female ideal of “wise mother, good wife” resurfaced when the Republic of Korea inherited a Japanese colonial civil code and established modern family law in 1958.<sup>23</sup> The Korean War again pulled men away from their homes while separating many families by the thirty-eight parallel and leaving behind thousands of widows and orphans. With family survival at stake, mothers assumed the lofty responsibilities as family heads in the absence of men during and after the war. Women were to be wise, hardworking, and strong and were expected to take care of everything from financially supporting the family to educating the children, and from bringing the community together to rebuilding the nation.

Over the past decades’ experience of colonial modernization and the Cold War in South Korea, the image of the strong and self-sacrificing mother took on a particular importance in the expectation that they should compensate for the absent or emasculated Korean male under Japanese colonial rule, national division, and re-

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<sup>22</sup> Japanese colonial rule took various measures (e.g., social policies) to co-opt the nationalist leaders and elites in Korea. The line between resistance and collaboration became blurred during the 1930s in colonial Korea as colonial rule obtained the popular consent or hegemonic power.

<sup>23</sup> Youn Taek-Lim, 45.

colonization.<sup>24</sup> As discussed above, the construction of a wise, competent, and strong mother relies on an imaginary Korean tradition that naturalizes female subordination and at the same time idealizes female sacrifice. South Korea's claim to legitimacy in competition with communist North Korea also emphasizes the role of the strong, "wise mother, good wife" in an effort to reshape Korean society and consciousness toward a new collective identity. Therefore, the "wise mother, good wife" ideal, which was imported during the Japanese colonial era, combined with pre-modern neo-Confucian patriarchal ethics to reinforce the existing model of gender relations in modern Korean society. The "wise mother, good wife" ideology that Choi Eun-Hee portrays continues to shape the construction of ideal femininity in Korean cinema as the responses of my interviewees illustrate. Thus, Choi's star persona and her stardom become a site of contestation and negotiation in which dialectic relations among the national, the colonial, and the modern interact with each other while reconfiguring social relations of gender and proper position of women in post-colonial South Korea.

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<sup>24</sup> Cho Haejoang, in *Under Construction*, 167.

## **The New Woman Type:**

### **Rebuilding and Nurturing the Modern Korean Nation**

Despite the prevalence of the female ideal of “wise mother, good wife,” postwar Korean society witnessed groups of women entering public spaces outside of the domestic sphere due to a shortage of manpower resulting from the Korean War. These women were often referred to as “new women.” The term, “new woman” {sinyŏsŏng} originated from the New Women’s Movement of the 1920s during the Japanese colonial period. This movement was a reaction to gender inequality in the patriarchal household and advocated the concept of free love and marriages of choice instead of arranged marriages. As a symbol of modern and western culture, the new woman during the 1920s’ colonized Korea referred to an elite woman who received an adequate education (primarily through studying abroad in Japan) and who stressed women’s exploration of their own sexuality as well as their pursuit of self-realization. However, the New Women’s Movement began to fade away as the Korean male elite and political leaders who led the nationalist movements incorporated the female ideal of “wise mother, good wife” during the 1930s. The new woman quickly came to represent the concept of decadence, self-indulgence, moral decay, and hedonism and was thought to pose a threat to authentic Korean culture from the standpoint of nationalists. Though short-lived, the New Women’s Movement continued to exist into the 1930s and the 1940s in the form of the socialist labor movement. New women re-emerged during the 1950s in the complex ideological terrain of the Cold

War and the discourse of gendered nationalism in Korea.<sup>25</sup> Thus, the definition of the new woman can vary depending on the focus of inquiry. The concept of the new woman utilized in this dissertation refers to a woman who received formal education and engaged herself with modernization projects for the rebuilding of the Korean nation in a general sense.

Choi Eun-Hee portrays the new woman type primarily in two films, *Evergreen Tree* [*Sangnoksu*] (1961), and *Rice* [*Ssal*] (1963). Choi's characters in these two films represent an intellectual woman outside the spheres of family and home who is willing to use her knowledge to participate in national reform projects. Set in the Japanese colonial era, *Evergreen Tree* tells the story of two college graduates who travel back to their hometown to spread the ideology of enlightenment or "mental awakening" to rural society. The Japanese colonial government initiated the Rural Revitalization Campaign {Nongch'on Chinhŭng Undong or Nongch'on Kyemong Undong} in 1932. This campaign aimed at improving the economic conditions in the countryside, which was still home to more than three-quarters of the colonial population. In fact, the ulterior motive of the rural campaign was to enhance state involvement with rural affairs and the state's penetration of rural society. Although the campaign was designed as a means of colonial control, nationalist elites (both male and female) utilized it as an opportunity to enlighten and educate farmers while emphasizing "spiritual" aspects of village life in an effort to reconstruct a

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<sup>25</sup> Choo Yoo-Shin, *Madame Freedom and The Flower in Hell*, in *Hanguk Yŏnggwawa Kŭndaesŏng* (Sodo, 2005), 25.



Korean national identity.<sup>26</sup> *Evergreen Tree* depicts the national elites' efforts within their involvement in the Rural Revitalization Campaign of the 1930s.

Under the oppression of the Japanese colonial government, the male protagonist builds a community center and educates farmers, and Young-Shin (Choi Eun-Hee) establishes a school to promote literacy. One day, she falls ill from overwork and finally dies with her dreams unfulfilled. Unlike the previous character type, which stayed in the household as a mother and wife, this new woman type portrays an elite woman who spearheads the rural campaign against colonial rule. However, a closer look at the film reveals the subtext of the narrative in which she is interpellated as a “subaltern subject” by an ideological apparatus, the nation state.<sup>27</sup> The film constructs the discourse of Korean nationalism through the representation of masculinity. For instance, in the scene where Young-Shin falls over in the street due to overwork, the camera pans to the right to show a group of Korean men singing in a low but powerful voice. Shot from Young-Shin's point of view, this scene functions as the heroic moment in the film providing her with power and renewed motivation to rise up again and serve the great cause of nation-building. Although Choi portrays a revolutionary woman who fights against the Japanese colonial rule, Choi's character in *Evergreen Tree* does not take up the position of autonomous agency. Young-Shin

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<sup>26</sup> Gi-Wook Shin and Do-Hyun Han, Colonial Corporatism: The Rural Revitalization Campaign, 1932-1940, in Gi-Wook Shin and Michael Robinson, eds., *Colonial Modernity in Korea* (Harvard University Asia Center, 1999), 70-71.

<sup>27</sup> Choo Yoo-Shin, 14.

(Choi) can only participate in the nation-building project by uniting with the male subjects.<sup>28</sup>

The Korean-American middle-aged women in group one offered a critical view of the male-centered narrative in *Evergreen Tree*. Ms. Davis, who pointed to the controlling male desire underlying the strong mother image in *Mother and a Guest*, observed that *Evergreen Tree*, too, was told through the male point-of-view:

“In *Evergreen Tree*, Choi plays a new woman during the Japanese colonial era. On the surface level, she is a strong woman. She speaks up in front of men, she is at the forefront of the Rural Revitalization Movement {Nongch'on Kyemong Undong}, educating farmers and children. But there is a love story between Young-Shin (Choi's character) and Dong-Hyuk (the male protagonist) and the film centers around this love story. Whatever role Choi Eun-Hee plays, she is presented through the male's point-of-view...[his] romantic point-of-view.”

Ms. Brown, a Korean-American social worker in Kansas, concurred reflecting her memory of reading the novel on which the film is based:

“I remember Chae Young-Shin (the female protagonist) as a very independent woman in the original novel. I think the novel stresses her role as a revolutionary comrade {hyŏngmyŏng Tongji}, but the film seems to focus more on her image as a romantic partner [of the male protagonist]. I remember that I was disappointed when I saw the film. I thought, ‘it's not the image of Chae Young-Shin that I imagined.’....She assumes a sort of secondary role in the film while men are central and more important.”

*Evergreen Tree* is based on a novel of the same title. Written in 1935 by Shim Hoon, the novel depicts Koreans' struggles against Japanese colonialism focusing on a platonic love story between the two young elites who lead the Rural Revitalization Campaign resisting against the colonial rule. Critically acclaimed as successfully

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<sup>28</sup> Kim Sun-Ah, The Modern and Korean Nationalism, in Choo You-Shin et al. eds., *Hanguok Yŏnghwawa Kŭndaesŏng* (Sodo, 2005), 65-66.

lifting the Korean national spirit, the novel has been considered one of the key works in the history of Korean literature. While the image of the female protagonist, Chae Young-Shin, came to represent a prototype of the new woman, the aspect of her revolutionary activism is watered down in the film as Ms. Davis and Ms. Brown observed during the interview.

The Korean middle-aged women in group two expressed similar opinions about Choi's character playing a role secondary to the male character in *Evergreen Tree*. Ms. Kang even related the image of the new woman in *Evergreen Tree* to Choi's typical image as a traditional mother. While talking about the specific scene where Choi's character teaches children how to read and write in Korean at school, Ms. Kang observed:

“It seems to me that Choi Eun-Hee plays a motherly role again in *Evergreen Tree*. She takes care of children and teaches them Korean. She works for the future of the country...yet, she becomes similar to the image of self-sacrificial Korean mother. The appearance seems different from the Choi Eun-Hee in *My Mother and a Guest*, but the symbolic role is related to the chaste Korean woman type...hardworking and sacrificing....”

The Japanese colonial government promoted the use of the Japanese language while limiting lectures and lessons on the Korean language in school and public spaces. As the Pacific War intensified in the late 1930s, the use of the Korean language was completely banned in colonial Korea. Thus, teaching Korean to children in the film marks a symbolic act of resistance, in which Young-Shin (Choi) enlightens Korean people about the essence of a Korean national identity. Yet, the interviewees in group two viewed that the new woman type that Choi Eun-Hee played in *Evergreen Tree* still emphasized the role of woman as a caretaker, i.e., a motherly role dedicated to

nurturing and educating children. Ms. Shin, a music teacher in Seoul, Korea, argued that the gender roles in *Evergreen Tree* replicated the division of labor within the patriarchal household:

“Choi Eun-Hee is kind of ‘only woman among those present’ {hongilchŏm}....She is a wifely woman in the men’s world. Dong-Hyuk (the male protagonist), on the other hand, would go out, work in groups with other men, physically and actively build something (a community center) for the village people....Choi Eun-Hee mostly stays at school, takes care of children, visits people at home....She is sort of isolated...symbolically, she takes the role of a wife or helpmate {naejoja}.”

The use of words by the respondents such as “secondary role” (Ms. Brown), “motherly role” (Ms. Kang), and “the role of a wife or helpmate” (Ms. Shin) point to the situation where the new woman type embodied by Choi Eun-Hee is relegated to the status of a subaltern subject, which is auxiliary to the masculine subject of the nation. Given that these women gave positive responses to Choi’s image as a traditional mother interpreting it as a strong and outstanding woman, their critical evaluations of the new woman type in relation to its “motherly/wifely” role seem to be operating under different criteria or discourses. In other words, while the discourses around the strong Korean mother emphasize the importance of women’s role in rebuilding modern Korea, the discursive formation of the new woman ideal relates to the workings of gendered nationalism that subjugate women to the anti-colonial masculine ideology. Within the discursive construction of the male subjectivity as an allegory for the nation, the services and sacrifice of women for the national reconstruction project are not so much recognized or appreciated. Ms. Hong, a Korean housewife in group two, made this point clear:

“Chae Young-Shin (Choi’s character) ended up dying at the end of the film (*Evergreen Tree*), right? After all the hard work, working like a cow, she dies without seeing any results....Our country is built upon a lot of women’s sacrifice but our history does not seem to recognize that....Women work really hard but men usually take all the credit at the end in our Korean society.”

Ms. Taylor, a Korean-American research associate in Kansas, echoed Ms. Hong’s sentiment in regards to the male-centered subtext of Korean nationalism:

“Korea as a nation is structured in a way that women obtain their economic and social status through their husbands....The success of a husband is the success of his wife in Korean society....Yet, women’s labors and efforts formed the basis for South Korea’s economic development and international recognition today.”

Chungmoo Choi’s argument resonates with my interviewees’ observations.

Choi maintains in her article, “Nationalism and Construction of Gender in Korea,” that the dominant discourse of nationalism in post-colonial Korea “strategically chooses to suppress women in order to privilege the male subject position of the nation.”<sup>29</sup> This gendered nationalism in Korea, thus, continues to subordinate women to men in the economy, politics, and culture, while valorizing the male subjectivity as nationalistic and therefore heroic. In a similar vein, Seungsook Moon discusses the androcentric nature of South Korean nationalism. Moon stresses that anti-colonial nationalism homogenizes the nation by reclaiming masculinity and as a result constructs modern South Korea as an androcentric nation.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Chungmoo Choi, Nationalism and Construction of Gender in Korea, in Elaine Kim and Chungmoo Choi, eds., *Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism* (Routledge, 1998), 28.

<sup>30</sup> Seungsook Moon, in *Dangerous Women*, 37.

The subjugation of women to the anti-colonial masculine national ideology is also evident in the film, *Rice* (1963), in which Choi Eun-Hee starred as a new woman type. Choi plays Chung-Hee, a national elite, who is devoted to the rural modernization movement in the early 1960s. Chung-Hee loves Yong-Yi, who is a veteran of the Korean War, but her father does not approve of Yong-Yi because he was disabled in the war. Even though Yong-Yi walks on crutches, he is a man of iron will. He takes the lead in developing deserted land in the village by excavating a water tunnel through a mountain. The film's narrative centers on Yong-Yi's efforts to complete the waterway against all odds. Obstacles to this excavation project include corrupt politicians, represented by Chung-Hee's father, and the incapable government officials of the town. Chung-Hee's role is to encourage Yong-Yi whenever he confronts difficulties. With the full support of a new government led by president Park Chung-Hee (the Third Republic), Yong-Yi and the townspeople succeed in excavating the water tunnel and the once destitute area is transformed into fertile farmland.

The Korean middle-aged women in group two talked about *Rice* in response to its gendered narrative structure:

**Ms. Kim:** Yong-Yi is *the hero* in the film (*Rice*). It's the story about one man with an indomitable spirit...who heroically brings the village to great prosperity.

**Ms. Han:** Choi Eun-Hee's role is to cheer him up and help him...to applaud him for his success and be happy for him.

**Ms. Lee:** Again, that's the role of a wife or helpmate, don't you think?...[Choi's character] functions to make Yong-Yi's story more dramatic and more romantic.

Made in 1963, *Rice* exposes the workings of gendered nationalism while at the same time functioning to validate the industrialization project under Park's military dictatorship. President Park Chung-Hee came into power in 1961 after a military coup and embarked on intense industrialization as a national project. While this film follows a story of one pioneering man, it provides a justification of the military coup by Park Chung-Hee.<sup>31</sup> In the film, Yong-Yi's dream is dramatically realized at the narrative's conclusion by virtue of the support of the military government in the form of gunpowder needed to excavate the tunnel. In this way, the film asserts the need and necessity for a true leader who will guide Korean people from the colonial past toward an affluent and promising future. Within this state nationalism, the female subject can obtain a social status and enter the public sphere only through the relationship with the male subject.<sup>32</sup>

While the image of the *yangban* woman of the neo-Confucian Chosŏn dynasty played a crucial role in securing authentic Koreanness in the postwar era of shifting identities and social values, the effete and ineffective *yangban* male was largely blamed for Korea's shameful colonial past and the crisis of Korean nationhood. In his account of the "May 16 Revolution" (as president Park named the 1961 military coup d'état) entitled "The Country, the Revolution and I," Park Chung-Hee legitimizes his military coup which is to write a new chapter of Korean history:

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<sup>31</sup> Byun Jae-Ran, 'The Construction of Modern Female Subjectivity through 'Labor,' in Choo You-Shin et al. eds., *Hanguk Yŏnghwawa Kūndaesŏng* (Sodo, 2005), 102.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 104.

This Revolution was not simply a change of regimes. It was a new, mature national debut of spirit, marking the liquidation of the continuation of the ancient and medieval times of schism and strife. It marked, too, the end of 500 years of stagnation of the Chosŏn dynasty (1392-1910), the oppression and bloodshed of 35 years of Japanese rule and the nagging chronic diseases bred by the residue of the Liberation. It was a national debut, inspired by the courage and self-confidence of a people determined never again to be poor, weak or dumb. This resolution is the turning point in the history of modern Korea. It is our third start after Liberation. It is our last chance for national renaissance.<sup>33</sup>

Park's vision for creating a rich, strong, and modern Korea began with a search for an alternative manhood that could replace the emasculated and failed manhood of the neo-Confucian scholar-bureaucrat. Throughout his eighteen-year regime, this military dictator was obsessed with the idea of the countryside as the locus for the nation's reconstruction.<sup>34</sup> As Park continued to hold the renewed hope of national recovery in rural communities, the idealized images of agrarian heroes became the new subject of the authentic Korean national culture. In the processes of the remaking of Korean nationhood and the redemption of Korean manhood, the once lazy, passive, backward, and dependent farmers were transformed into modern Korea's newly enlightened farmer-heroes who overcame all the hardships and saved their communities and the nation from destitution and destruction.<sup>35</sup> *Rice* is a good example that visualizes president Park's vision for the new Korea.<sup>36</sup> *Yong-Yi in Rice*

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<sup>33</sup> Park Chung-Hee, *The Country, the Revolution and I* (Hollym Corporation, 1962), 22.

<sup>34</sup> The rural modernization campaign called "the Saemaŭl Undong" (New Community Movement) was initiated by President Park in April 1970 and was at the center of Park's modernization project.

<sup>35</sup> Sheila Miyoshi Jager, *Narratives of Nation Building in Korea: A Genealogy of Patriotism* (M.E.Sharpe, Inc., 2003), 85-86.

<sup>36</sup> Director Shin Sang-Ok was well known for his close, personal relationship with President Park and Prime Minister Kim Jong-Pil.



is reborn as a true hero by overcoming his own personal struggles (e.g., his emasculation or impotence marked by his disabled leg and his dependence on crutches) as well as the external obstacles represented by corrupt village leaders, backward traditions, and lazy neighbors.

In the meantime, Choi's character, the new woman and nationalist elite who is active in the anti-colonial project of modernizing Korea, stands in a strange position of neither heroic nor autonomous within the discourses of Park's military dictatorship and industrialization project. The responses by the interviewees in both groups one and two illustrate the peculiar nature of anti-colonial Korean nationalism that interpellates men as primary members or subjects of this new Korea. Women, on the other hand, assume positions as secondary citizens or subaltern subjects despite their contribution to the modernizing and industrializing Korean nation; thus, women's roles are reduced to that of validating Korean men's heroic achievements. Therefore, the anti-colonial nationalism, combined with the politics of gendered citizenship, confers neither revolutionary agency nor autonomous subjectivity to women as exemplified by the new woman that Choi Eun-Hee embodies in *Evergreen Tree* and *Rice*.

### **“She Was a Pioneering Actress”:**

#### **Nurturing and Enlightening the Korean Film Industry**

As noted above, while Choi Eun-Hee played many different roles throughout her career, her typical character type was that of the devoted mother/wife who makes sacrifices for the good of her family. Choi’s off-screen persona reinforced this perception. For instance, the popular media, even today, have promoted Choi as a hard-working actress and a devoted wife to her husband/director Shin Sang-Ok. Newspapers and popular women’s magazines during the 1960s in particular contributed to the construction of Choi’s image as a chaste, dutiful, and loyal woman. Numerous articles about Choi emphasized that she was “a great actress and a great wife at the same time.”<sup>37</sup> As an actress, she was in fact a working woman outside the domestic sphere. However, newspapers and magazines of the time tended to promote Choi’s star image as a chaste woman devoted to her husband, director Shin Sang-Ok. Throughout her career, her husband directed the majority of the films in which Choi Eun-Hee starred. As a film producer and director, Shin Sang-Ok established his own production company, *Shin Film*, which was the most viable film studio during the 1960s (i.e., the golden age of Korean cinema).

Moreover, it was the second marriage for Choi. Ironically, the fact that she broke the neo-Confucian rule of “one husband to the last” did not seem to contradict her star image as a devoted wife. Popular magazines often justified her divorce by stressing her first husband’s amoral character (e.g., his jealousy, violence) and the

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<sup>37</sup> Kwak Hyun-Ja, 142.

hardships she faced in an effort to maintain her first marriage during and after the Korean War. Newspapers and magazines also reported on the stories and anecdotes regarding Choi's devotion to Shin Sang-Ok. For instance, Choi would star in her husband's film for free when *Shin Film* was in a financial crisis; or she would make and bring a lot of food to the shooting location for her husband and the staff.<sup>38</sup>

The responses given by the interviewees in groups one and two also suggest that the collaboration or partnership with her husband, Shin Sang-Ok helped maintain and reinforce Choi's star persona as a chaste and devoted wife. For instance, Ms. Smith, a Korean-American research scientist in Kansas, spoke about her good impression of Choi Eun-Hee as Shin Sang-Ok's wife:

“So, Shin Sang-ok directed almost all of Choi's film? Most of them, right? My impression of Choi is...it always comes together with Shin Sang-Ok. ‘The director, Shin Sang-Ok and the female lead, Choi Eun-Hee.’ That is the fixed image I have. [Choi as] both a *true* actress and a *good* wife.”

Ms. Lee, who is a Korean housewife and mother in group two, told me before the interview that she had a chance to meet Choi in person during the production of the film *Red Muffler* in 1964.<sup>39</sup> During the interview, Ms. Lee said, “I once saw her in person...at a sort of private gathering...She was with Shin Sang-Ok. She was very polite, quiet, humble, feminine...a *typical* Korean woman.” Ms. Shin, a music teacher in Korea, even exhibited a romanticized view of Choi's relationship with her husband, Shin Sang-Ok:

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 141-142.

<sup>39</sup> Ms. Lee and her husband met with Shin and Choi as part of an advising process for *Red Muffler*, which was about aviators in the Korean Army. Ms. Lee's husband was a pilot who was interviewed for the film.

“I respect her as a person because she lived her life with earnestness. She has always been loyal to her husband, Shin Sang-Ok...always worked hard...and survived a difficult time. I think her life history should be made into a film. It will make a great love story and drama...[because of] her devotion to work, to her husband, to her life.”

These responses indicate that Choi’s off-screen images, which center around notions like devotion to her husband, work ethics, etc., correspond well to her on-screen persona as a devoted wife and mother. Moreover, the supposedly gendered roles of filmmaking (e.g., Shin as a director/producer, Choi as an actress and a caretaker in *Shin Film*) did not seem to construct Choi’s image as a subordinate. Rather, Choi is viewed more as a partner than an underling. Ms. Green in group one (Korean-American middle-aged women) described Choi’s relationship with her primary director in the following way: “Choi Eun-Hee was a good partner of Shin Sang-ok’s. I believe they made films together. Choi contributed a lot to his filmmaking.” Furthermore, the women in group two (Korean middle-aged women) believed that Choi did not merely rely on others to make decisions for her. For instance, Ms. Han commented:

“Choi Eun-Hee played diverse roles. She willingly chose film roles. She tried different things. That’s why she is a pioneering actress and I respect her. I remember seeing Choi’s interview.... [In the interview] she said, she played every role or character she ever wanted to play, so she had no regrets. Even though her husband or other staff or her fans didn’t like her to play a particular role, she did it anyway.”

The particular role that Choi’s fans did not want her to play, to which Ms. Han referred, was that of *yanggongju* (a prostitute servicing American GIs) or a barmaid. Choi Eun-Hee plays an overly sexual role of *yanggongju* in *The Flower in Hell* [*Chiokhwa*] (1959), and the role of a barmaid who becomes a mistress of a married

man in *Romance Gray* [*Lomaensŭ Kŭrei*] (1963). Although both films were critically acclaimed, the characters that Choi portrayed in these films created disputes and aversion among many fans of Choi Eun-Hee. They wanted their top star to remain as a chaste and traditional woman. In an interview, Choi Eun-Hee recalled that she received so many phone calls and letters after she starred in *The Flower in Hell* and *Romance Gray* that she decided not to play such a role again.<sup>40</sup> I will further discuss this character type in the following section.

The Korean middle-aged women in group two talked about their positive reactions to Choi Eun-Hee:

**Ms. Han:** She played so many diverse roles that sometimes I feel that she attempted different roles so actively even when the roles didn't go well with her image.

**Ms. Kang:** In my opinion, the audiences couldn't keep up with Choi. Choi Eun-Hee was ahead of the times, so to speak. That kind of woman would live a difficult life (laughs).

**Ms. Hong:** I liked Choi Eun-Hee. She was a pioneering actress in Korean film history.

**Ms. Shin:** She lived such a dramatic life. She worked so hard with Shin Sang-Ok and she starred in so many different films.

While screening clips from *Flower in Hell* during the focus group interview, Ms. Allen, a Korean-American housewife in group one, turned toward me and asked if the actress was really Choi Eun-Hee. Later in the interview, Ms. Allen said, "I didn't know that she played so many different roles like yanggongju in *Flower in Hell* that we just saw...I didn't even recognize her in that film. She was a true actress...and a real star." The Korean-American middle-aged women in group one

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<sup>40</sup> Yeo Sun-Jung, The Time of Beautiful Temptress: *Yanggongju* and *Apres-Guerre*, in Choo Jin-Sook et al. eds., *Yŏsŏng Yŏnghwain Sajŏn* (Sodo, 2001), 29.

thought highly of Choi for playing diverse roles throughout her career, which they interpreted as Choi actively shaping her star image:

**Ms. Brown:** If you look at Choi's films closely, [you can see that] she played diverse roles and she seemed to try to transform herself. She seemed to be a hard-worker.

**Ms. Smith:** I think she had a strong desire as an actress and high expectation about herself. She was not satisfied with her fixed image as a traditional mother and a widow, so she attempted to break away with that self-sacrificial image.

**Ms. Davis:** I think Choi Eun-Hee actively chose different roles and films for herself.

**Ms. Brown:** Right, Choi Eun-Hee seemed to be actively and consciously participating in creating her own image.

**Ms. Evans:** I didn't recognize Choi in *Flower in Hell*, either.

**Ms. Brown:** I think it is very admirable that she tried different things.

Thus, the responses by the interviewees in both groups indicate that positive evaluations of Choi and respect for her are primarily derived from her dynamic participation in her partnership with Shin Sang-Ok as well as her conscious effort to play different roles.

Although widely known as a top actress of the golden age of Korean cinema, Choi Eun-Hee was a film director as well. Throughout her career, she directed three films: *A Girl Who Was Raised as a Daughter-In-Law* [*Minmyŏnŭri*] (1965), *A Princess in Love* [*Kongjunimŭi Tchaksarang*] (1967), and *A Bachelor Teacher* [*Ch'onggak Sŏnsaeng*] (1972). At the time of the release, these films were promoted as "the films made by our top star, Choi Eun-Hee" and were quite successful both critically and commercially.<sup>41</sup> There were only two female directors before Choi Eun-Hee in Korean film history, which indicates the obstacles facing women

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 163.

filmmakers in the film industry. Film critics, however, often undermined Choi's ability as a director speculating that it was the well-equipped system and the experienced staff of *Shin Film* rather than Choi's own skill or talent that guaranteed the quality of these films. In 2000, *A Girl Who Raised as a Daughter-In-Law*, the first film she directed, was re-screened at the Korean Women's Film Festival. Since then, her films have been re-evaluated while functioning as inspiration for younger female filmmakers in Korea.<sup>42</sup> My interviewees in both groups one and two did not realize the fact that Choi Eun-Hee had directed films. As for Choi's role as a director, Ms. Hong and Ms. Shin in group two further expressed their respect for her professionalism:

**Ms. Hong:** It may be too much to use the term, feminism {yŏkwŏnsinjang}, but I think Choi was the first woman who made her name, and was recognized, approved, and respected that much outside of the family. [I would say that she was] the first professional woman, the first professional actress [in Korean cinema].

**Ms. Shin:** I think she was a person of clear vision, who was dedicated to her area.... She officiated the director, Lee Jang-Ho's wedding.<sup>43</sup> How rare it is for a woman to officiate at a wedding ceremony! It shows how much she was respected in society.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 162-163.

<sup>43</sup> Lee Jang-Ho was one of the most popular male directors during the 1970s and 1980s in Korea.

## ***Yanggongju* and Barmaid:**

### **Gender, Class, Sexuality, and National Identity**

While the previous two character types (e.g., the traditional Korean mother, the new woman) are characterized as asexual, the third character type Choi portrays is overtly charged with sexuality. In other words, it is the character type that considerably departs from Choi Eun-Hee's star persona of a chaste and devoted woman. Often called "modern girls," or "barmaids" this type of women represents working women at such urban spaces as bars, tearooms, and clubs, but more often than not they refer to dangerous temptresses engaged in the sex industry. They were sexually active women freed from the familial and communal constraints, reflecting the social context of changing gender relations, and the spread of materialism, consumerism and individualism in postwar South Korea.<sup>44</sup> They were also inextricably connected to the class hierarchy of industrial capitalism made visible during the times of fast modernization and urbanization. The modernization and industrialization process brought about changes in the private sphere creating the notion of the urban, nuclear, middle-class family as a norm. The modern girls or barmaids, accordingly, came to represent fallen women or "working-class sex workers" outside the family and home in cities.<sup>45</sup> Choi Eun-Hee played the role of a working-class female sex worker in two films, *Flower in Hell* (1959), and *Romance Gray* (1963). This section will compare and contrast these two films focusing on the

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<sup>44</sup> Choo Jin-Sook et al. eds., *Yŏsŏng Yŏnghwain Sajŏn* (Sodo, 2001), 24-25.

<sup>45</sup> I am borrowing the term, "working-class sex workers," from Hyun Sook Kim in *Dangerous Women*.



ways in which the female subjectivity of working-class sex workers is doubly conflicted with the gender hierarchy of Korean patriarchy and the class hierarchy of industrial capitalism.

In *The Flower in Hell*, Choi Eun-Hee plays a role of “yanggongju” or prostitute, who serves American GIs in a U.S. military camp town in Seoul. Choi’s character, Sonya, is romantically involved with a Korean man, Young-Sik, who steals goods from U.S. military warehouses and sells them on the black market. He proposes to Sonya and asks her to come to his hometown with him to marry him once he makes a fortune. But Sonya betrays him by seducing and falling in love with his younger brother. In order to run away with Young-Sik’s younger brother, Sonya reports to the police a robbing incident that Young-Sik has planned. While being chased by the police, Young-Sik narrowly escapes and stabs Sonya in the stomach before he shoots himself.

As expressed in the film through dialogue, Korean prostitutes servicing the U.S. military are considered by their own people “the kinds which mingle with neither Koreans nor Americans” (Shin Sang-Ok, 1959). Used derogatorily, the term, *yanggongju* means “Yankee whore,” “Yankee wife,” or “Western princess,” occupying the lowest status within the hierarchy of prostitution.<sup>46</sup> The representation of a *yanggongju* in *The Flower in Hell* is suggestive of the complex political and economic terrain in postwar South Korea. After the Korean War, in the context of the

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<sup>46</sup> Hyun Sook Kim, *Yanggongju* as an Allegory of the Nation: Images of Working-Class Women in Popular and Radical Texts, in *Dangerous Women*, 178.

U.S.-sponsored military system and dependent economy, these women were a good indication of both the appreciation and humiliation that South Korean people had in regards to their country's neo-colonial relations with the United States. On the one hand, the sexual liberation and material lavishness these women displayed represented an aspiration for economic development and capitalism; on the other hand, uncontrolled female sexuality and corruptive consumerism provoked a threat to traditional social values while their shameful bodies were markers of humiliation and loss of self-pride felt by Korean people.<sup>47</sup>

The images of Sonya (Choi's character) in *Flower in Hell* evoke these ambivalent feelings of aspiration and ridicule among Koreans. While the film displays material lavishness through Sonya's dress and make-up, her vulgar and crude manners link such lavishness to the idea of a low life tainted by imported Western culture. For example, Sonya wears gaudy Western dresses, short tight skirts, high-heels, huge earrings, and thick make-up. These fetishized depictions of Sonya's body are further accentuated by her continuous cigarette smoking while chewing gum. The Western attire, make-up, and smoking confer her the legitimate brand of a *yanggongju*, which reflects the pejorative views that render her more a commodified object than a subject.

Moreover, the narrative development of *The Flower in Hell* serves to legitimize the dire punishment of Sonya at the film's end. Young-Sik, Sonya's Korean lover, shares Sonya's low social standing because he is also materially

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<sup>47</sup> Choo Yoo-Shin, 39-40.

dependent on American GIs. He proposes to Sonya to marry him and return to his hometown to start a new life. Sonya's seduction of his younger brother and reporting to the police are not only the betrayal of her lover, but, symbolically, a treachery to Korean masculinity and patriarchy. Sonya has discarded a chance to leave the sex trade (i.e., neo-colonial condition) and resume conventional motherhood in the countryside (i.e., before and outside the tainted Western culture), thereby regaining respect for herself as well as redeeming Young-Sik's wounded masculine pride. By rejecting this good opportunity for redemption, Sonya and her already shameful body become doubly stigmatized and the film punishes her through her brutal killing by her former lover who leaves her body in the mud. The narrative's conclusion, which focuses on Sonya's stabbed and muddy body, serves to reify the notion of a *yanggongju* as a low, vulgar, dirty, and shameful social object.

In response to the representation of a *yanggongju* in *The Flower in Hell*, the interviewees noted that even though the film told the story from a male point-of-view, it did not tend to objectify Choi (or Choi's characters) as a sexual object. Ms. Allen and Ms. Green in group one (Korean-American middle-aged women) discussed the issue of the male gaze in relation to the social change brought about by westernization processes in Korea:

**Ms. Allen:** I think the male point-of-view in Choi's film is....kind of indirect...more subtle....It was right after the Korean War [when Choi's films were made], so people were innocent and less westernized, and the subject matters were rather ethical. After [Korean society was] westernized, woman began to be treated like a complete...sexual object.

**Ms. Green:** I think so, too. I don't think Choi Eun-Hee was objectified....I think the way of representing women changed with the influx of western culture [in Korea]. Traditionally, in Korean society, I don't think women

were treated as sexual objects....After the economic development in Korea, after Korean society was modernized, the way women were treated or represented has changed.

The interviewees in group two (Korean middle-aged women) also noted the lack of the voyeuristic male gaze in Choi's films. According to Ms. Shin, even *The Flower in Hell*, in which Choi played a sex temptress, did not treat the female character as a sexual object:

“Choi was depicted as a human at least. Even when she played ‘yanggongju’ in *Flower in Hell*, she was not treated like a sexual object. The point-of-view [in *Flower in Hell*] is basically male-dominant but [it is] more like...objective....I don't think Choi's body is subject to vulgar, sexual voyeurism. [Choi's body] was not treated as ‘a feast for men's eyes’ {Nunyogitkōri}.”

Choi Eun-Hee portrays an ideal, chaste woman in such films as *Mother and a Guest* and *Evergreen Tree*, so it is natural that she is not objectified as a sexual object in those films. However, it is significant that her character is not subject to the voyeuristic male gaze even when Choi plays an overtly sexual role like a *yanggongju* in *Flower in Hell*, as Ms. Shin pointed out. As described above, the film represents Sonya's body in a fetishized manner focusing on the material lavishness of her dresses, make-up, earrings, etc. However, her commodified body is not filtered through the male character's controlling gaze in the film. Instead, the film's narrative treats Sonya and her prostituted body as an allegory for the suffering nation. The power disparity between nation-states has been transferred onto women's bodies while the prostituted female bodies of the weaker state in particular represent the

dominated position of the weaker state.<sup>48</sup> Sonya's stigmatized body, which provides sexual services to American GIs in exchange for money, mirrors South Korea's subordination to America, that is, Korea's dependence on American economic and military aid after the Korean War. As the predicament of a *yanggongju* embodies the collective suffering of the nation, the epithet *yanggongju*, albeit its pejorative connotation, becomes a symbol of Korean national identity compromised by neo-colonial relations.

However, *Yanggongju* or military prostitution as a trope of the suffering nation no longer embodies an innocent victim who has fallen prey to the intrusion of (neo-)colonizing forces as the film's narrative reveals that Sonya conspires against the Korean male. She becomes complicit with foreign intrusion (i.e., the colonizer) in disdaining the Korean male (i.e., Young-Sik). It is not simply the U.S. military and the neo-colonial condition that disenfranchises Young-Sik but humiliation and frustration also occurs at the hands of Sonya by rejecting his proposal and instead conspiring with his brother. Young-Sik violently reacts when he realizes the deceptive and destructive nature of *yanggongju* (hidden behind Sonya's material lavishness) that provokes rivalries between brothers thus inducing the disintegration of Korean men and threatening the collective Korean identity. The narrative conclusion seems to suggest that Sonya is so damaged and contaminated that only her death can protect the national integrity of South Korea. This kind of narrative

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<sup>48</sup> Katharine H.S. Moon, Prostitute Bodies and Gendered States in U.S.-Korea Relations, in *Dangerous Women*, 141.

strategy, which blames Koreans' failure to free themselves from the pain of neo-colonization on the *yanggongju*, allows no space for the discussion of how Korean patriarchy, class inequality, and the U.S.-sponsored Korean dictatorship have contributed to the marginalization of military sex workers. With the restoration of Korean masculine authority as its primary concern, the film ignores the intricate relations of economic, cultural, and ideological hierarchies that relegate Sonya to the lowest social standing in postwar South Korea. Instead, the film centers around sentimental depictions of masculinized humiliation, masculinized hope, and masculinized despair (e.g., Young-Sik's unfulfilled desire to leave the camp town to start a family in his hometown) while privileging Korean (masculine) national identity over the sexual-class position of female sex workers.

Unlike *The Flower in Hell*, *Romance Gray* (1963) does not vilify the female protagonist engaged in sexual labor. Choi Eun-Hee portrays a barmaid, Man-Ja, in this family melodrama. Man-Ja is a lower-class woman working at a bar who becomes a mistress of a renowned professor. Professor Cho is a respected father and husband at home and a revered professor in society but he has another home with Man-Ja. When his wife finds out about Man-Ja, she storms into Man-Ja's apartment and destroys Man-Ja's furniture and clothes. Man-Ja decides to leave Seoul praying for the happiness of Cho's family. The film ends with Professor Cho apologizing to his wife and restoring the family order.

The representations of female characters in *Romance Gray* reconstitute a binary opposition of Korean women in terms of the good mother/wife and the bad

mistress, reproducing the essentialist link between women and domesticity. Professor Cho's wife represents a "wise mother, good wife," wearing a traditional Korean dress that hides her body. In contrast, Man-Ja (Choi's character) is constructed as a "working woman in the street" wearing Western clothes that expose her legs and arms, and smoking cigarettes and drinking alcohol.<sup>49</sup> Man-Ja gets an apartment with the money Professor Cho gave her but her apartment never becomes a home or private sphere; instead, it remains as a workspace for her to make a living because Professor Cho pays her for her sexual labor whenever he visits.

This private-versus-public gender structure becomes more complicated in terms of class relations in *Romance Gray*. Professor Cho's wife represents the middle-class housewife in a nuclear family while Man-Ja represents the working-class sex worker. Given that modern, industrialized Korean society is premised on the normative values of an urban, nuclear, middle-class family, Man-Ja is not merely positioned as a home wrecker but she also disrupts the new ideal of family unit under Korea's industrial capitalism. Thus, when Professor Cho's wife storms into Man-Ja's apartment and violently destroys Man-Ja's furniture and clothes, her attitude is open and aboveboard. However, even though the film portrays Man-Ja as a social outcast in terms of her sexual-class position, it does not vilify or stigmatize her as in the case with Sonya in *The Flower in Hell*. Instead of rejecting entirely traditional feminine roles and identities, Man-Ja has accepted and tried those roles with Professor Cho in

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<sup>49</sup> Park Hyun Sun, From a Secret Room to the Street, in Choo You-Shin et al. eds., *Hangook Yŏnghwawa Kŭndaesŏng* (Sodo, 2005), 67.

her apartment. Moreover, Man-Ja's respectable decision to disappear for the happiness of Cho's family at the narrative's conclusion endows her with the possibility of redemption. While it is not clear in the film where Man-Ja is headed, she leaves Seoul, where she was forced into prostitution, and possibly returns home to take up the roles of mother and wife. Therefore, the working-class sex worker that Choi Eun-Hee portrays in *The Flower in Hell* and *Romance Gray* is constructed as a social outcast within the trope of national suffering and the normative formation of middle-class family, respectively, while having no chance to explore her subjectivity and sexuality. The roles of the Korean dictatorship in collusion with U.S. militarism and imperialism, Korea's economic policies, and Korean patriarchy in encouraging working-class Korean women into prostitution are still not explored in both films.

### **“She is A True Survivor”**

Younger audiences today in Korea have not seen many films in which Choi Eun-Hee starred. When I interviewed Korean young females in their twenties, they recalled Choi in relation to the kidnapping incident by North Koreans. In 1984, South Korean newspapers reported that North Koreans kidnapped Choi Eun-Hee when she was visiting Hong Kong as the president of an art school in January, 1978. Her husband, Shin Sang-Ok, was kidnapped six months later as well. Choi and Shin stayed in North Korea until they escaped in 1986. While in North Korea, Choi starred in six films that Shin Sang-Ok directed. Before she escaped, she even



received the best actress award at the Moscow International Film Festival in 1985.<sup>50</sup> Detailed stories about the kidnapping and their subsequent escape were scarce until recently when Choi Eun-Hee published her autobiography in 2007. Shin Sang-Ok died in early 2007 and Choi is currently working on a project in memory of Shin's work and his contribution to the Korean film industry.

Because of this incident, Korean audiences even today cannot seem to recall her without relating her with the decades-old Cold War ideology. However, even the reporting of Choi's kidnapping by North Koreans has helped construct positive images of her in terms of her devotion to work and marital fidelity. Ms. Shin in group two talked about Choi as a true survivor with enthusiasm:

“She lived such a dramatic life....So, she was kidnapped first, and Shin Sang-Ok kind of volunteered to be kidnapped...to be with her, Right? ....But even in North Korea, she didn't quit, she made films with Shin Sang-Ok. Then, later, she escaped [North Korea] together with Shin Sang-Ok. She *never gives up!* She is a really outstanding woman....I respect her as a person.”

Ms. Green in group one recalled Choi's kidnapping incident and interpreted her image in a similar fashion:

“I remember Choi's kidnapping incident...when Kim Jong-Il kidnapped her....Shin Sang-Ok, too, was kidnapped, right? That was a horrible incident. It must have been a horrible experience. I had admiration for her because she is a true survivor. She is an exceptional, outstanding woman.”

Therefore, Choi's on-screen and off-screen personae function in a way to support the interviewee's view of Choi as an outstanding woman who is devoted to her work and her husband.

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<sup>50</sup> Choo Jin-Sook et al. eds., *Yŏsŏng Yŏnghwain Sajŏn* (Sodo, 2001), 108.

The star images of Choi Eun-Hee entail multi-layered and overlapping ideological connotations in post-colonial, postwar Korea (e.g., anti-colonial nationalism, neo-Confucianism, the international and domestic politics of the Cold War, the Korean military dictatorship, U.S. militarism and imperialism, the gendered processes of modernization and industrialization, etc.). As illustrated above, the interviewees viewed Choi as a strong woman and a true survivor who endured the difficult times during ideological complications.

While analyzing the focus group interview data, I found it interesting that the respondents provided positive evaluations of Choi based on their interpretations of the traditional mother as a strong woman. I have tackled the issue of how “traditional” translates into “strong” or “manliness” in terms of the construction of the strong Korean mother as a stronghold of the disrupted society in postwar South Korea. In addition to this discursive formation of the strong Korean mother, another factor that may have played into the interviewees’ positive evaluations of Choi is the influence of a passage of time on their perception of this star. There is almost a fifty-year gap between the time when Choi had emerged as a star and the time when I conducted these focus group interviews. A combination of Choi’s on-screen persona as a devoted, strong mother and her off-screen images formulated through such incidents as the kidnapping by North Koreans and the subsequent escape may have reinforced the interviewees’ investment in Choi’s image as a strong, outstanding woman. Furthermore, the interviewees’ nostalgic feelings toward their collective memory of surviving historically difficult times may also have factored into their

association of Choi with a strong woman. For example, the interviewees referred to Choi as “our mother.” This symbolic reference indicates a parallel between the hardships that both Choi and their mothers experienced during the postwar era.

On the other hand, my interviewees were rather critical of the secondary role that the “new woman” played in Choi’s films, which I originally regarded as the embodiment of a strong, elite woman. In the process of analyzing and deconstructing the phrases, words, and tones that my interviewees utilized during the interviews, I realized that their critical evaluations of the “new woman” type stemmed from the discourses of gendered nationalism within which postwar Korean cinema constructed the notion of the new Korea at the expense of female subjectivity.

The topic of the working-class sex worker that Choi Eun-Hee portrayed generated little discussion during the focus group interviews. The responses by my interviewees to this overtly sexual role focused on their respect for Choi as an actress for her conscious effort to play diverse roles. My interviewees pointed to the lack of the voyeuristic male gaze in Choi’s films even when she portrayed a *yanggongju*. I have argued that a *yanggongju*’s body is not subject to overt voyeurism because the representations of military prostitution are more intrinsically connected to a larger masculine national ideology (e.g., the trope of the historical trauma of neo-colonization that continues to frustrate Korean masculine authority). In the next chapter, I will further develop the issue of the male gaze in post-colonial Korean cinema (a different type of male gaze) in relation to the star images of Chang Mi-Hee.

#### **IV. Chang Mi-Hee (1958- ): a Comfort Woman in a Militarized Nation**

This chapter examines the images of a Korean female film star, Chang Mi-Hee, whose screen persona embodies a sophisticated modern woman and a desperate mistress. Chang Mi-Hee became a major film star during the late 1970s and was one of the most bankable stars in the Korean film industry during the 1980s. Her stardom coincides with the time when modern South Korean society was undergoing the processes of molding and remolding of its economy and its members under the rubric of repressive military regimes led by Park Chung-Hee and Chun Doo-Hwan. The historical period of her stardom marks an era of newfound economic power and stability in the world system while the anticommunist national identity remained intact because of the prolonged military confrontation with North Korea. Moreover, the sense of urgency to catch up with developed countries (particularly, the desire to emulate the United States) intensified the neo-colonial influences of American culture on Korean culture. Accordingly, Chang's star persona is intertwined with these multiple layers of oppressive military dictatorship, state-controlled capitalism, the Cold War, and neo-colonial domination, especially by U.S. hegemony.

Throughout the 1970s, Korean society experienced rapid economic growth under the strong administrative control of Park Chung-Hee's military government. The Park regime, however, came to an end after his assassination in 1979. General Chun Doo-Hwan quickly attained power through a coup d'état and a declaration of martial law. After brutally suppressing the citizens' uprising against authoritarian

rule in the city of Kwangju in May 1980, Chun became a president marking the second military regime in South Korea. With the U.S. condoning the coup d'état and the Kwangju massacre, Chun's administration (the Fifth Republic, 1980-1987) continued the twin goals of strengthening national security and constructing an industrial economy.<sup>1</sup> This new administration also attempted to enact changes in all aspects of Korean society in an effort to transform Korea into a more open and democratic society. However, the Chun administration uncritically internalized and reproduced militaristic reforms, which originated from Japanese colonial practice and had been employed by Park's regime, rather than democratic reforms.

While dubbed as one of the "Asian tigers" due to its rapid economic development, Korean society in the 1980s also witnessed the growth of the anti-regime movement among college students, intellectuals, and workers. Chun's regime suppressed these social movements dedicated to the democratization of Korean society through various techniques of discipline and violent punishment (similar to the techniques used by Japanese colonial rule) in the name of national solidarity and total unity. Because poverty was viewed as the hotbed of communism, enriching the nation through its industrial economy was the most urgent and important goal of modern South Korea.<sup>2</sup> The result was the nationalist rhetoric of South Koreans as a unified people who were expected to pursue the common goal of building a strong economy. At the same time, this ideology of national unity with common destiny

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<sup>1</sup> Seungsook Moon, *Militarized Modernity and Gendered Citizenship in South Korea* (Duke University, 2005), 27.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 6

constructed political dissidents and their call for democracy as an obstruction to national economic development as well as an erosion of national security against the communist North.

Chang starred in thirty nine films (mostly melodramas) and is still active in films and television today. Unlike Choi Eun-Hee, whose persona is strongly associated with a traditional Korean mother, Chang's on-screen images represent a young, modern woman outside of the patriarchal family order. This chapter focuses on her films from the late 1970s to the 1980s, where she portrays a distinctive character type of a young woman whose loneliness and neuroses constantly make her dependent on men's protection and control. These films are *Winter Woman* [Kyöulyöja] (1977), *The Home of Stars II* [Byöldülüi Kohyang II] (1978), *Night Markets* [Yasi] (1979), *The Flower at the Equator* [Chökdöüi Kkot] (1983), *Deep Blue Night* [Kipko P'urün Pam] (1985), and *Hwang Jin-ie* [HwangChini] (1986).

### **A Desperate Mistress in Modernizing Seoul**

Chang Mi-Hee portrays a desperate mistress type who is lonely and neurotic in many of the films in which she starred, but most distinctively in four films: *The Home of Stars II* (1978), *Night Markets* (1979), *The Flower at the Equator* (1983), and *Deep Blue Night* (1985). I will provide brief plot summaries of these four films in an effort to describe Chang's on-screen persona.

*The Home of Stars II*<sup>3</sup> begins with a scene where Su-Kyung (Chang's character) is just discharged from a mental institution. The film soon reveals that she is an orphan who has managed to live as a pickpocket. She falls in love with Mun-Oh, a divorced, middle-aged high school teacher, who takes care of her like his child. However, Su-Kyung shows signs of mental derangement and after giving birth to a baby (from her previous relationship), she finally goes back to the mental institution. One year later, she recovers from her neuroses and is discharged from the mental hospital only to learn that Mun-oh and her daughter have died. The final scene shows Su-Kyung left alone in an empty and windy street.

In *Night Markets*, Chang plays a high school senior, Seung-Ah, who fails to enter a college and begins to wander (literally and figuratively) through life. After she loses her virginity to a man she randomly met at a bar, she falls in love with Seok-Ho, an ice hockey player in college, but he accidentally dies during a game. Her wandering leads her one night to meet a married psychiatrist, Dr. Min. She wants

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<sup>3</sup> This film is a sequel to *The Home of Stars I*, which was directed by Lee Jang-Ho in 1974.

to become Dr. Min's lover, but he is only interested in studying Seung-Ah's neuroses. The film ends with Seung-Ah aimlessly wandering the streets alone.

In *The Flower at the Equator* and *Deep Blue Night* Chang Mi-Hee plays more mature roles but these roles still reinforce Chang's persona as a lonely, neurotic, desperate woman. In *The Flower at the Equator*, Sun-Young (Chang) lives in an apartment by herself as a mistress of her middle-aged boss, Kim. When he finally leaves her to return to his family Sun-Young develops an eccentric relationship with Mr. M., who lives across from her apartment and observes her everyday through a telephoto lens. Sun-Young soon dates another man, Jung, but she attempts suicide and is hospitalized in a mental institution after she witnesses Jung and her female friend together in a hotel room. Despite Mr. M.'s efforts to save her, she ultimately commits suicide.

Chang portrays another neurotic, desperate woman in *Deep Blue Night* and the film can be read as the story of a failed American Dream. In the film Jane (Chang) comes to the US after getting married to an African-American G.I. However, she soon gets divorced and loses custody of her daughter due to her neuroses. Alone and isolated from American society, she makes money through contract marriages. Jane enters a contract marriage with Ho-Bin, a Korean man who wants to get a green card and bring his pregnant fiancé to America. Jane falls in love with Ho-Bin but he wants to get out of the marriage once he obtains a green card. As the marriage is about to come to an end, Jane becomes more desperate and neurotic. Jane and Ho-Bin go on a



farewell trip to the Grand Canyon, but Jane realizes that Ho-Bin plans to kill her. The film concludes with Jane shooting Ho-Bin and then herself in the desert.

In *The Home of Stars II* and *Night Markets*, Chang portrays the image of a rebellious adolescent outside of the family unit. Chang's characters begin both films with the appearance of a tomboy-like innocent girl. These characters fail to find their position within the patriarchal social order, which in turn results in their wandering around in the city of Seoul. They fall in love with middle-aged men who are close to their fathers' age, but fail to make a family with these men. Frustrated and deranged, Chang's characters literally and figuratively wander without knowing what to do with their lives.

Chang's character type in the four films (*The Home of Stars II*, *Night Markets*, *The Flower at the Equator*, and *Deep Blue Night*) represents a fallen woman whose mental disarray keeps her desperately in need of men (i.e., men's protection or love). She smokes cigarettes, drinks alcohol, and has sexual relationships with different men, all of which are linked to the notion of modern decadence or moral decay in Korean society in general and Korean cinema in particular. She voluntarily offers her body to be used (or, in her mind, loved) by multiple men. After the frustration of her desire for romantic love, she either becomes a wanderer in the street or commits suicide at the narratives' conclusion.

I will now move to the responses of the focus groups related to Chang's on-screen persona. The interviewees in group one (Korean-American middle-aged women) and group two (Korean middle-aged women) interpreted Chang Mi-Hee's

typical on-screen images in terms of a mistress type. The responses below illustrates the tension between representations of women as devoted wives and mothers whose roles are defined by traditional Korean family values and women as mistresses who exist outside of a marriage or family. Ms. Taylor, a Korean-American research associate in group one, observed:

“Chang Mi-Hee portrays a lover for men to have fun with. [Chang’s characters are involved in] extra-marital relationships or adultery. Maybe [Chang’s characters are] not suitable for marriage....Chang’s image is more like a lover with whom a man would cheat on his wife.”

Ms. Brown, a Korean-American social worker in the same group, concurred while comparing Chang’s films with Choi Eun-Hee’s films:

“I think that Choi’s films and Chang’s films are structured differently. Choi’s films tend to evoke sympathy with her characters, while Chang’s films create a distance between her characters and us. Choi represents an ideal wife, and Chang represents an evil temptress, so to speak. Choi is valorized as a ‘wise mother, good wife’<sup>4</sup> while Chang is despised and isolated in the films.”

The members of group two (Korean middle-aged women) also perceived Chang as a lover or mistress type. For instance, Ms. Kang, a restaurant owner in Korea, responded that “Chang is a very sexual woman....Chang is not the type of a woman that men want to marry but maybe just enjoy and have fun with, temporarily. [Chang portrays a woman who is] not suitable for a wife, kind of disposable.” Ms. Lee, Ms. Kang, Ms. Hong, and Ms. Han discussed the narrative treatment of Chang’s characters, focusing on the tension between wife and mistress within Korean patriarchal society:

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<sup>4</sup> See chapter three for the discussion of “wise mother, good wife” ideal.

**Ms. Lee:** I think [Chang's films] reflect men's fear. When Chang's character wants more than just fun, when she becomes jealous, obsessive, and wants to be his wife, then it's a problem. I think that's why male characters in the films beat her, kick her, or even tries to kill her [because Chang's character poses] potential harm to destroy their families.

**Ms. Kang:** Yeah, like in *Deep Blue Night*...Ahn Sung-Ki (actor's name who played the male protagonist) just wants to use her to get a green card, but Chang wants to marry him.

**Ms. Hong:** Yeah, that's why [Chang's characters] are punished at the end.

**Ms. Han:** So, it's like a warning, "don't go over the boundaries. Don't try to be a wife. Stay as a mistress. You're safe as long as you stay as a mistress."

Echoing Ms. Han's view, Ms. Kim, a college instructor in group two, interpreted the underlying message of narrative endings in Chang's films as follows:

"I think...Chang represents an undesirable woman. [Chang is] undesirable from the point-of-view of [Korean] men and Korean society. It is like a warning, like "don't live a life like that. Don't sleep with men other than your husband. If you live your life like hers, you will end up like her, you will either die or go half-crazy."

While the devoted mother ideal that Choi Eun-Hee embodies is highly valorized in the film narratives, the lonely, neurotic, desperate woman Chang portrays is rejected and often subject to physical violence by the male characters in Chang's films. Choi Eun-Hee's star persona represents an ideal femininity within the discourse of nation building during the immediate post-Korean War era. As discussed in the previous chapter, the respondents in both groups one and two gave positive evaluations, interpreting Choi along the lines of the social discourse of a strong Korean mother. On the other hand, Chang Mi-Hee's star images evoke anxieties about female sexuality outside a social norm. The interviewees in group one and group two pointed to the narrative treatment of Chang's characters, which

they viewed as functioning as a warning to women who go against dominant gender ideologies of the time.

The narrative treatments of Chang's characters (e.g., social isolation, mental disorder, physical punishment) are closely connected with the dominant discourse of ideal femininity during the period of her stardom, which defined the role of wife and mother as a feminine norm. The South Korean government's official policy regarding women during the military dictatorship under Park and Chun was central to the construction of normative female subjectivity of the housewife and mother. The national policy regarding women's welfare in the 1970s and the 1980s divided women into two groups: "general or normal women" and "women who require protection." The former category included those who performed such roles as a mother, wife, and daughter within a family unit. The latter category referred to those who were outside of a family and did not conform to the above three roles. The national project for general/normal women was to inform them of modern family management skills (e.g., the rational management of the household) while at the same time reinforcing traditional family values based on neo-Confucian ethics through various educational programs, which was primarily predicated on the idea of wise mother, good wife. The project for the latter group of women was to provide them with shelters as well as education through counseling programs and vocational training programs.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Choi Chung-Wha, "A Study of Female Subjectivity in Korean Melodramas in the 1960s and the 1970s," Unpublished Thesis, (Seoul National University, 2002), 26-30.

The national campaign for the rational management of the household during the 1970s and 1980s involved the tailoring of daily practices like cooking, shopping, and consuming various goods according to the needs of the nation's industrializing economy.<sup>6</sup> Women were not only expected to be wise mother, good wife but they were also mobilized as rational managers of the household economy for the sake of boosting a strong economy. By linking the household management to economic development, the industrializing state called for the streamlining of daily life (modeled after Western modern housewife's role) as women's national duty. As the state intended to inculcate and essentialize women's identity as prospective housewife and mother, other roles were discouraged, marginalized, and even condemned.

It is necessary to discuss the issue of urban development and expansion during the 1970s and 1980s in order to understand the dominant discourses in which Chang Mi-Hee's star images were produced and circulated. Since the 1960s, Seoul, the capital of South Korea, has grown at a record-setting pace.<sup>7</sup> The modernization and industrialization processes accelerated urban-centered economic development despite the government's effort to revive the economy of the countryside.<sup>8</sup> The rapid economic growth transformed Seoul into a cosmopolitan urban space, which was

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<sup>6</sup> Seungsook Moon argues that women were incorporated into the nation via the rational management of the household in "Marginalized in Production and Mobilized to be Domestic," *Militarized Modernity and Gendered Citizenship in South Korea* (Duke University, 2005), 68-94.

<sup>7</sup> In regards to the discussion of modernization of Seoul, see chapter two in Laura C. Nelson's book, *Measured Excess: Status, Gender, and Consumer Nationalism in South Korea* (Columbia University Press, 2000), 33-68.

<sup>8</sup> President Park Chung-Hee initiated the rural modernization campaign called "the Saemaul Undong" (New Community Movement) in April 1970 and this campaign was at the center of Park's modernization project.

almost unrecognizable from its previous cityscape. High-rise apartment buildings, shopping centers, and government and industrial complexes were erected where paddy fields and orchards used to be only a couple of decades ago. Seoul came to represent successful modernization and industrialization and the city played a crucial role as a national economic engine as well as the national center of power and culture. Massive migration from rural areas to urban centers in South Korean society in the 1970s, particularly of young people, coincided with Seoul's economic development. More and more young women moved to Seoul and away from their families but many of them ended up living in poverty without jobs.<sup>9</sup> The Korean government regarded these young women without families and jobs not only as women who require the state's protection but also as future prostitutes. While representing the decay of traditional mores and social orders, these wanderers became the objects of supervision and punishment.<sup>10</sup>

The process of urbanization and commercialization also brought about the explosive growth of service industries, particularly sex industries in the 1980s.<sup>11</sup> The result was the massive entry of young women into the expanding areas of sex industries (e.g., bars, tearooms, hostess clubs) in such urban spaces as Seoul.<sup>12</sup> Korean melodramas of the late 1970s and the 1980s reflect these specific social and

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<sup>9</sup> Laura Nelson, 38-39.

<sup>10</sup> Choi Chung-Wha, 30.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>12</sup> I limit the discussion of urban development to Seoul since Chang's films that I analyzed in this chapter are set in Seoul (except for *Deep Blue Night* which is set in Los Angeles).

economic conditions of Korean women in their narrative treatments of female characters. The majority of these melodramas, including Chang's films, reproduce narratives which reward female characters that stay in or return to the domestic sphere (i.e., the role of normal/general women) while depicting female characters outside of traditional marriage and family (i.e., women who require protection) in an unfavorable light. These female characters are often brutally punished at the conclusion of many of these films.<sup>13</sup>

Chang Mi-Hee's characters display dangerous female sexuality in the dynamic relationship between the dominant gender ideology of Korean society and the economics of the film industry during the 1970s and the 1980s. The Korean film industry repeatedly produced narratives that portrayed female characters who lack families and/or homes against the backdrop of modernizing Seoul while exploiting unbridled female sexuality as its major commercial strategy.<sup>14</sup> Since the late 1960s, as television sets spread widely to Korean households and as other leisure activities became available, the film industry suffered as both the number of productions and audience attendance levels decreased in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>15</sup> In an effort to draw audiences back to the silver screen, the film industry resorted to explicit sexual content, which could not be portrayed on television. As a result, a new

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 77-79.

<sup>14</sup> Soyoung Kim, *Cinema, Technomunhwaii Purin Kkot* (Yŏlhwadang, 1996), 62.

<sup>15</sup> Lee Ho-Geol, *A Study of Actress Stardom in the 1970s*, Unpublished Thesis, (Choong Ang University, 2001), 9.

type of “hostess film” emerged as a commercial film genre.<sup>16</sup> Hostess films tell the stories of social outcasts or less-fortunate Koreans in the process of rapid social transformation and changing morals. They came to be dubbed as hostess films because of the exploitive objectification of hostess’ bodies (hostess refers to barmaids or sex workers in the 1970s-1980s Korean context) while dramatizing the decadence of their sexual adventures. In addition to the influx of television, film censorship under President Park (enforced in 1972) impoverished the Korean film industry. However, sexual content (e.g., prostitution, adultery) was exempted from censorship practices with the military regime condoning sexual subjects in order to divert the public’s attention away from political issues.<sup>17</sup>

Although Chang Mi-Hee does not portray a young woman who migrates from the countryside to Seoul and ends up being a sex worker, her character’s specific position as a wanderer or fallen woman in modernizing Seoul shares similarities with the increasing number of young females involved in the sex industry, which emerged as a social problem in the 1980s. In other words, Chang Mi-Hee does not portray the role of a hostess or barmaid in films but her on-screen persona parallels hostess images. As noted above, Chang’s character type as a lonely neurotic mistress is intimately connected to her decadent sexual escapades with different men. Moreover,

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<sup>16</sup> The first incident of hostess films is *The Home of Stars I* (Lee Jang-Ho, 1974). This film was based on Choi In-Ho’s bestselling novel of the same title and commercially successful while creating enormous buzz around the film’s explicit content. Chang Mi-Hee starred in the sequel to this film.

<sup>17</sup> Hye Seung Chung, “Toward a Strategic Korean Cinephilia: A Transnational Detournement of Hollywood Melodrama, in Kathleen McHugh and Nancy Abelman, eds., *South Korean Golden Age Melodrama: Gender, Genre, and National Cinema* (Wayne State University Press, 2005), 130.



Chang's characters embody dangerous sexuality, and are repeatedly objectified by the voyeuristic male gaze, which I will discuss in the following section.

### **Discipline and Punishment via the Male Gaze**

The excessive and dangerous sexuality of Chang Mi-Hee's characters is often times presented through the voyeuristic gaze of male characters in the films. I focus on three films in order to discuss the male gaze: *Winter Woman* (1977), *The Flower at the Equator* (1983), and *Hwang Jin-ie* (1986). These three films construct Chang's characters as erotic objects of male desire, which they seem to accept without resistance and/or without regard to their own will or desire.

Chang Mi-Hee became a film star with the commercial success of *Winter Woman* in 1977.<sup>18</sup> She plays a high school senior, Ewha, from an upper-middle class family. One day, Ewha receives a love letter from an anonymous man who claims to observe her everyday. The anonymous man continues to send her love letters on a daily basis. Ewha feels terrified about the fact that somebody is always watching her, but at the same time she becomes curious about this man. She meets Yo-Sub, the anonymous admirer, who reveals himself as her neighbor right across the street.

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<sup>18</sup> In 1977, Chang Mi-Hee rose to stardom through the commercial success of the film, *Winter Woman* and this stardom coincides with her casting in a prime-time TV soap opera, *Ch'öngsil Hongsil*, aired on TBC in the same year (TBC was one of the three major national TV networks, together with KBS and MBC, during the 1970s and the 1980s). In *Ch'öngsil Hongsil*, Chang played a poor but honest and hardworking girl, Chisun, whose boyfriend wants to leave her to marry a girl from a rich family. Every weekend, the many viewers of this program gathered around the TV sets to watch Chisun (Chang)'s efforts to keep the love of her life (Lee Ho-Geol 21). While working exclusively for TBC, Chang Mi-Hee conveyed a wholesome image, which drastically departed from her neurotic and decadent image in films. Therefore, Chang's images portrayed in television contradict her on-screen personae.

They become friends and Yo-Sub invites Ewha over to his family's summer cottage, where he expresses his sexual desire for her. Terrified Ewha pushes him back and runs away. She later discovers that Yo-Sub has committed suicide because of her rejection. Shocked and guilty, Ewha decides to dedicate herself to whomever needs her body.

*The Flower at the Equator*, which I have discussed in the previous section, is also significant in analyzing Chang's images as an object of the male gaze. The film starts with a scene in which Mr. M. surreptitiously views the beautiful Sun-Young (Chang), who has just moved into the apartment across from him. Through his telephoto lens, Mr. M. obsessively observes her everyday. He anonymously sends presents to Sun-Young and watches her opening them through his telephoto lens. His self-centered fantasy leads him to a conclusion that Sun-Young is being used as a sex object by other men, so Mr. M. decides to save her from them.

*Hwang Jin-ie* is a retelling of a famous myth surrounding the life of a *kisaeng* (courtesan or *geisha* in Japanese), Hwang Jin-ie, who lived in 16<sup>th</sup> century Korea. Originally born into a gentry (yangban) family, Hwang Jin-ie is known as the most beautiful and talented *kisaeng* in pre-modern Korean history. The film begins with a well-known story, which recounts how this mythical figure chose a life as a *kisaeng*. In the opening scene of the film, she is seen from the point-of-view of a vulgar lower-class man, Duk-Bo, who dares to have a crush on this noble lady. While hiding, he watches her changing clothes and bathing, and steals her shoes and undergarments. However, upon hearing of Jin-ie's arranged marriage, Duk-Bo kills himself. On the

day before her wedding, Duk-Bo's funeral procession stops in front of Jin-ie's house and refuses to move. Only after she covers the coffin with her underwear gown, does the procession finally move. After this incident, Jin-ie gives up her marriage and gentry status to become a kisaeng.

Chang's characters in the above three films (*Winter Woman*, *The Flower at the Equator*, and *Hwang Jin-ie*) take up the passive subject position in a hierarchical relationship of gazes. As a bearer of gazes, the male seems to possess power over the female. In *Winter Woman*, for instance, Ewha feels scared because she is being observed, yet she cannot reciprocate that gaze. *The Flower at the Equator* reinforces the structure of an unreciprocated gaze between Mr. M. and Sun-Young. Throughout the film, Sun-Young seldom sees Mr. M., and so she remains as an object to be seen. By preventing Sun-Young's gaze, Mr. M. maintains the pleasure and power as the bearer of gazes. For instance, in the scene where Mr. M. visits Sun-Young's apartment, Mr. M. asks her with an authoritative voice to turn off the light. *Hwang Jin-ie* reproduces this dual structure of male gaze and female object as well. Jin-ie is in a higher position in terms of social ranks, but not in the exchange of gazes. In the beginning of the film, Jin-ie senses a person outside and asks in a terrified voice, "who is it?" (Bae Chang-Ho, 1986). The audience only sees her over the shoulder of Duk-Bo or through his point-of-view. In this sense, the lack of female gaze confers female characters no symbolic power over male characters in the narratives.

The interviewees in both groups one and two believed that the narratives of Chang's films screened for the focus groups served to fulfill male fantasies and

unfolded through the point-of-view of the male characters thereby objectifying the female character in the films. The Korean-American middle-aged women in group one were critical of the masculine narratives of the films and the male point-of-view that objectified Chang's characters. As Ms. Smith, a research scientist in Kansas, said:

“Chang Mi-Hee's films are all about male fantasies....These four films [*Winter Woman*, *The Flower at the Equator*, *Deep Blue Night*, and *Hwang Jin-ie*] are about a young, beautiful, unhappy woman whose life is controlled and changed by men. These stories tell us about the typical male fantasy that men can control and change a woman's life.”

Ms. Brown, who is a social worker, echoed this sentiment: “all the stories are told from the point-of-view of the male characters. The male characters are observing Chang's characters, and secretly in love with her in a creepy, abnormal kind of love...[The male characters are] like so-called *stalkers*.”

Ms. Allen, a housewife and mother in group one, described the voyeuristic male gaze used in Chang's films in comparison to Choi's films, saying, “I think the male point-of-view...in Chang's films...is more direct and sadistic [than Choi's films]....After [Korean society was] westernized, woman began to be treated like a complete...sexual object.” Ms. Green, a college instructor in Kansas, concurred and reiterated Ms. Allen's point:

“I think so, too....Chang Mi-Hee is definitely objectified. I think the way of representing women changed with the influx of western culture [in Korea]. Traditionally, in Korean society, I don't think women were treated as sexual objects...After the economic development in Korea, after Korean society was modernized, the way women were treated or represented has changed.”

These two interviewees (Ms. Allen, Ms. Green) suggested that the adoption of the voyeuristic male gaze was related to the social change brought about by westernization processes in Korea. In other words, these women believed that Chang's films conspicuously utilized the male gaze that objectified female characters because they were made during a time when Korean society had undergone or was experiencing westernization and modernization processes under capitalism. Without clarifying or specifying how westernization of Korean culture led to the direct installation of the male gaze in Korean cinema, the members of group one generally believed that Chang's films were more influenced by westernization and capitalist values than films of previous eras. Thus, these films treated female characters as sexual objects.

The respondents in group two (Korean middle-aged women) also identified the use of the voyeuristic male gaze in Chang's films. Ms. Kang, a restaurant owner in Seoul, spoke about Chang's films in relation to the Korean films of the same era: "[Chang's films are] all about men's possessive desires {soyuyongmang}. Many of the films made during the 1980s dealt with men's distorted, dark fantasy about women. Women were only sexual objects in films at that time." Ms. Shin, a music teacher in the same group, also expressed her critical view of the male-centered narrative: "The female body was basically 'a feast for men's eyes' {nunyogitkōri} ....Chang['s characters] are [depicted] less than human. [Chang's characters] are only an object that belongs to men, so men can do whatever they want to do with her."

While the respondents in group one (Korean-American middle-aged women) related the use of the male gaze to westernization, the respondents in group two (Korean middle-aged women) pinpointed the influence of American films as the major reason for the adoption of the male gaze in Korean films. In other words, the members of group one regarded the influence of western culture and the subsequent social change in Korea as leading the prominent use of the male gaze and female objectification in film, and the members of group two considered American films in particular to be responsible for this change in the treatment of the female in Korean films. The respondents in group two talked about how Bae Chang-Ho (Chang's primary director)<sup>19</sup> and other Korean directors during the 1970s and 1980s tried to imitate or emulate American films, which supposedly resulted in the introduction of the voyeuristic male gaze in Korean cinema. Ms. Kim, a college instructor in Seoul, put it this way: "I'm sure Bae Chang-Ho watched a lot of foreign, American films and copied, imitated them. [Copying American films] was common. It was not considered wrong at that time, during the 1970s and the 1980s." Ms. Lee, a Korean housewife and mother, explained the perception of American films vis-à-vis Korean films:

"[Copying American films] was even encouraged. Korean films were [considered] old-fashioned, [and] not fun to watch. So, [if a Korean film] looked similar to American films, they said it was well-made, new, and different from old times, and said Korean cinema got better. So, [the directors] *diligently* imitated [American films]."

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<sup>19</sup> Bae Chang-Ho was a both commercially and critically successful director in the Korean film industry during the 1980s.

Ms. Shin, then, conclusively said, “So, observing the female character secretly, objectifying her as a sexual object [in Korean films], *everything* came from, learned from American films (laughs). [Imitating American films] was considered a *good thing* to do.”

The respondents in both groups primarily associated the adoption of the male gaze in Chang’s films with foreign-induced social changes. However, I argue that the issue of the voyeuristic, controlling male gaze in Chang’s films is closely tied to the establishment of a national identity and the discipline of its population under Park and Chun’s military rule. I will come back to this point later.

As the Korean economy and society developed under the assistance of the United States in the post-colonial era, social and cultural practices were modeled after the American system. South Korea’s industrial development as one of the “miracle” economies of Asia even intensified the extreme sense of urgency about equaling the progress of developed countries (particularly the United States). Therefore, the prevailing notion of development or modernization was set up around the idea of imitating or emulating the United States. What was American came to represent what was modern, progressive, and advanced. As the interviewees in group two pointed out, Bae Chang-Ho (Chang’s primary director) was not free from the United State’s cultural influence when making films during the 1980s. American (Hollywood) films were prevalent in Korean movie theatres and television, and they often became the

objects of blind imitation by many Korean filmmakers.<sup>20</sup> The interviewees asserted that in this act of mimicry, the voyeuristic male gaze was imported from American films and widely utilized in Korean cinema.

It is significant that the ideas advanced by the members of groups one and two share similarities with the cultural imperialism thesis. The critical stance about the proliferation of American products and American way of life around the world is often referred to as cultural imperialism. Introduced by Herbert Schiller during the mid 1970s, the cultural imperialism thesis involves much more than just the dissemination of consumer goods or cultural products from one nation or culture to another. Rather, it refers to processes through which one nation or culture (typically a smaller, less powerful, “periphery” one) absorbs and acquires foreign cultural attitudes and values from another (a larger, more powerful, “core” one). Although scholars such as John Tomlinson, John Sinclair, and David Hesmondhalgh (among others) have argued for a significant theoretical shift in transnational cultural flows, emphasizing decentered processes of cultural globalization,<sup>21</sup> the cultural imperialism thesis seems still valid when discussing the relationship between Korea and the United States, and particularly the cultural hegemony of the United States in Korea. For instance, with the intense, unrelenting barrage of American products including films and television programs, Korean people have been immersed in an

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<sup>20</sup> For instance, Bae Chang-Ho’s *Flower at the Equator* (in which Chang starred) is commonly viewed as having copied the narrative of Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rear Window* (1954).

<sup>21</sup> David Hesmondhalgh, *Cultural Industries* (Sage Publications, 2002), 174-178.



overwhelming tide of American culture.<sup>22</sup> This cultural domination by the US produced the association of American products and culture with such notions as modernity and progression and thus was portrayed to most Korean people as better and superior.

As the respondents in groups one and two observed, such cultural influence from the West, especially from the US, resulted in the imposition of the mechanisms of looking (i.e., the male gaze), which was deeply entrenched in Western/American values at large (e.g., Capitalist patriarchy) and American media products in particular. Yet, these women were not cultural dupes who passively absorb the message and ideology from the dominant American culture as perceived by the cultural imperialism thesis. They were able to create a critical distance and pointed to the detrimental effects of Americanization on Korean native culture and on Korean films as a result of the exploitation of the male gaze and female objectification in films.

Now I want to bring in my argument on the peculiar kind of male gaze utilized in Chang's films that is related to the dominant ideologies of military culture during the 1970s and the 1980s. In order to build modern South Korea unified under the banner of strong economy and military, the Park and Chun regimes sought to transform individuals into dutiful nationals, i.e., docile and useful members of the nation who could carry out their assigned roles without critical thinking or resistance.

Crucial to this process was to distinguish legitimate members of the Korean nation

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<sup>22</sup> I argue that unidirectional cultural flows, which result in the core country's cultural domination in the periphery (i.e., cultural imperialism), and un-directional transnational cultural flows, which create multiple centers (i.e., globalization), are not mutually exclusive processes but rather concomitant processes.

from those who were not (e.g., political dissidents, not useful, undutiful Koreans). To this end, the state utilized various disciplinary techniques to monitor and indoctrinate Korean people (primarily through the government-affiliated civil organizations and the mass media).<sup>23</sup> At the same time, the use of physical force was pervasive during this period in the name of strengthening national security and economy. In this militarized Korean nation, those who failed to conform to the norms of correct attitudes and conduct were subject to violent punishment.<sup>24</sup>

Chang's characters are erotic objects of male desire in her films, but at the same time they signify an illegitimate member of the nation. Chang's characters are sexually active outside of marriage, and due to their neurotic insecurity these characters are always in need of men. Because only sex between a husband and wife is considered legitimate by the state and women's normative role is that of the rational manager of the household, Chang's excessive sexuality outside of the family unit relates to the notion of an inefficient, un-useful, and thus undutiful national who is not dedicated to the building of a rich and strong nation. The voyeuristic male gaze utilized in Chang's films, therefore, not merely reproduces the gendered structure of looking that objectifies the female for the benefit of masculine visual pleasure as in the case with mainstream Hollywood cinema. It, often in its violent and sadistic

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<sup>23</sup> These disciplinary techniques include the frequent use of anticommunist mottoes in formal schooling, civil organizations, and the mass media, and the creation of fear through the manipulation of news reports on communist infiltration. Various media campaigns and announcements were also used to encourage the populace to identify North Korean spies and impure elements (e.g., anti-regime movements) and report them to the police.

<sup>24</sup> Seungsook Moon, in *Militarized Modernity and Gendered Citizenship in South Korea*, 21-24.

form, is also intrinsically intertwined with the techniques of surveillance and normalization whose working is involved with the mobilization of individuals into the militarized, industrializing nation. This particular kind of male gaze, thus, functions as a mechanism to control and legitimize modern Korean nation's membership (with particularly heavy demands on women) at the time when military culture has permeated every aspect of South Korean society. However, interestingly enough, the male characters (i.e., the bearer of the gaze) in Chang's films do not exhibit potent masculinity. Rather, they embody the effeminate, marginalized Korean male who fails to adapt to the fast-paced modernizing society. I will discuss the implications of this impotent masculinity later in this chapter.

### **From Confucian Patriarchy to Capitalist Patriarchy**

This section focuses on the complex patriarchal discourses that produce Chang's star images as well as the ways in which the interviewees talk about Chang. Since the 1960s, Korean society witnessed a fast economic development with the support of a United States-backed economy. The roles of gender and patriarchy drastically changed under capitalism. It is important to note that the respondents used words such as "belong" and "possess," which demonstrates that the female becomes the individual male's property. For instance, in the discussion of Chang Mi-Hee's image, the respondents in groups one and two commented on a situation (e.g., women's position, status) in which women became men's personal property and under individual male's control. I argue that the idea of men's ownership and control

over women is symptomatic of a shift in Korean patriarchy: from Confucian patriarchy to capitalist patriarchy.

Ms. Davis, who is a writer and college instructor in Kansas, observed that “Chang’s films are about secular, sexual desires, especially men’s possessive desires {soyuyongmang}.... Woman belongs to a man as his sexual object [in Chang’s films].” Ms. Brown, a social worker in Kansas, seemed to be offended by the treatment of women in Chang’s films:

“Speaking of Chang’s films, all the films made woman as an object of man’s desires. If you have a relationship with another man, you are not [considered] pure... Woman has to be pure and a virgin. For whoever the man is, if he cannot possess her, no one else can have her, so he kills her or destroys her”

Ms. Smith, a research scientist, also maintained “[t]hese stories (Chang’s films) tell us about the typical male fantasy that men can control and change a woman’s life.”

The Korean middle-aged women in group two expressed similar views. For instance, Ms. Kang, who runs a restaurant in Seoul, said, “[Chang’s films are] all about men’s possessive desires. All the films made during the 1980s dealt with men’s distorted, dark fantasies about women. Women were only the sexual objects in films at that time.” Ms. Kim, a college instructor in group two, offered a very similar opinion to that of Ms. Brown in group one: “I think Bae Chang-Ho (Chang’s primary director) had some sort of weird, creepy fantasy about women, like if I cannot have her, nobody else can have her because she needs to stay pure.” Ms. Shin, a music teacher in group two, reiterated this view, saying, “[Chang’s characters] are only an object that belongs to men, so men can do whatever they want to do with her.”

I draw on Korean a feminist scholar, Cho Haejoang's argument in order to discuss the emergence of capitalist patriarchy in Korea. Cho observes that a new patriarchal system became dominant in Korea as the society underwent the process of industrialization and economic growth under capitalist principles. This new patriarchy was in the form of a nuclear family in which men take complete charge of economic activities while women (as wives) take care of household responsibilities. This social and economic structure, imported from the United States, together with a capitalist system, expanded and prioritized the public sphere over other realms of activities and practices. Thus, the importance of the private sphere (e.g., home) decreased while the importance of the public sphere was elevated.<sup>25</sup> With the advent of a highly industrialized capitalist society, the Korean male assumed both economic power and social dominance as a household's exclusive source of income and as a member of the expanded, all-powerful public sphere. On the other hand, the Korean female was alienated from the realm of the public sphere and came under the direct control of one single man, her husband.<sup>26</sup>

While reflecting this change, modern South Korean society (especially during the 1970s and 1980s) defines women's normative role as the rational managers of the nuclear family in urban industrial spaces, and identifies men as the principal family provider whose nuclear family is independent of his parents' agrarian household. The sexual division of labor rooted in the household (provider-husband and dependent

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<sup>25</sup> Cho argues that this is basically the same structure and development as patriarchy in modern Western societies.

<sup>26</sup> Cho Haejoang, *Hankukŭi Yŏsŏngkwa Namsŏng*, (Munhakkwa Chisŏngsa, 1999), 117-120.

housewife) lies at the core of the gender relations in the public sphere. Women are, at best, supplementary income earners while being marginalized as temporary, cheap, and secondary sources of labor in work places. This rigid gender division of labor and spaces is not totally new to modern South Korea under capitalist industrialization. As discussed in the previous chapter, neo-Confucian gender ideology during the pre-modern era dictated that the home was essentially the domain of the woman while a man was expected to handle public affairs and interact with the world at large. Based on the yin/yang discourse, these gender distinctions provided a fixed, ahistorical model for social relations of gender.

Yet, Confucian patriarchy (reinforced by neo-Confucian ethics) relied on a family-centered social order and thus, the private sphere played a very important role as the basis of the larger social structure. In an effort to explain the proper role of human beings in maintaining social order and political harmony, (neo-)Confucianism viewed the social structure as consisting of a series of concentric circles, with the intellectual and moral cultivation of oneself at the center of these circles enclosed by the family, the state, and finally the world. In other words, it is only “when the person is cultivated that order is brought to the family; when order is brought to the family that the state is well governed; when the state is well governed that peace is brought to the world.”<sup>27</sup> Confucian patriarchy, therefore, did not posit private and public spheres as having separate functions and spaces but rather as constituting links

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<sup>27</sup> W. Theodore DeBary et al., *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, Vol 1. (Columbia University Press, 1960), 331.

that were fundamentally connected and co-related. The establishment of harmony in the private sphere was key to sustaining order and peace in the public sphere.

Although women were related to interior space under Confucian patriarchy, they were able to receive considerable respect through their role as the mother, wife, and daughter-in-law not only in the family (i.e., extended family) but also in the larger kinship system and among neighbors in the community. Choi Eun-Hee represents this archetypal traditional Korean mother. The generally positive/favorable evaluations of Choi (both by the South Korean media and the interviewees) go hand in hand with Korean society's recognition of the importance of the mother's role. With the advent of capitalist industrialization, however, most Korean women experienced what Cho Haejoang calls the process of "housewifization," that is, the transition from a mother-centered to a wife-centered patriarchy.<sup>28</sup> Thus, a woman under capitalist patriarchy came to mean the wife of one man more than the mother of children. To reiterate the point, the interviewees' understanding of Chang's image in relation to the tension between housewife and mistress is situated within the context of housewifization of women in the 1970s and 1980s. Furthermore, the interviewees' interpretation of Chang as an object of male desire to possess and control reflects the shifting social meanings of the female body from its reproductive function to that of personal property of an individual man in the emergent capitalist patriarchy.

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<sup>28</sup> Cho Haejoang, *Living with Conflicting Subjectivities: Mother, Motherly Wife, and Sexy Woman in the Transition From Colonial-modern to Postmodern Korea*, in Laurel Kendall ed., *Under Construction: The Gendering of Modernity, Class, and Consumption in the Republic of Korea*, (University of Hawaii Press, 2002), 167.

However, I do not posit that the pre-capitalist Confucian patriarchy and its associated values are completely replaced by the later-imported capitalist patriarchal attitudes and practices. Rather, I argue that the latter ideologies associated with capitalism and Western culture are superimposed on the traditional patriarchal discourses. The traces of Confucian patriarchy are never erased and continue to operate in constructing female stereotypes in Korean cinema. For instance, neo-Confucian gender ideology has built on and renewed the gender distinctions under capitalist patriarchy. Likewise, the wise mother, good wife ideal (imported from imperial Japan and reinforced by the existing Confucian patriarchal values) builds on the notion of rational household management (imported from the West, particularly from the U.S. and institutionalized by South Korea's military rules). The construction of desirable femininity and hierarchical gender relations, therefore, involves the process of re-writing and over-writing.

The capitalist industrialization process taking place in Korea in the 1970s and 1980s normalizes and idealizes the female subject whose role is well balanced in the dialectic between the traditional and the modern. Central to this dialectic relation is the notion of *tongdosŏgi* (Eastern way, Western technology). Articulated by a moderate faction of the *kaehwap'a* (enlightenment faction, a group of neo-Confucian scholars who advocated the adoption of Western technology) in the late nineteenth century, this notion maintained the selective adoption of western culture to strengthen the nation in the face of colonizing powers. The ideology of *tongdosŏgi* separated the material sphere (in which the West was advanced,) from the mental sphere (in which



the East was supposed to be superior to the West). Accordingly, it actively brought in western technology to modernize the military and manufacturing systems but rejected other aspects of western culture. The ruling elites and military leaders of post-colonial South Korea embraced this pre-colonial notion of *tongdosŏgi*. By equating strong military and economy with the ideas of modernity and national development, they vigorously pursued and emulated Western technology, especially the American system while elevating the values of Korean tradition over Western cultural values in re/constituting the fundamental national identity of modern South Korea.<sup>29</sup>

This historical legacy of *tongdosŏgi* (i.e., the Eastern/Western dialectics) has a lasting impact on the workings of the ideological discourses surrounding Chang Mi-Hee's on-screen persona. Chang Mi-Hee, at the visual image level, embodies a westernized, modern woman. The responses by the interviewees support this perception: "Chang Mi-Hee has the image of a modern...westernized woman" (Ms. Evans); "She is like a fashionable modern woman" (Ms. Davis); "she looks very modern and sophisticated in films" (Ms. Taylor); "she (Chang Mi-Hee) seems to portray a sophisticated woman who lives in Seoul by herself" (Ms. Lee); "she represents a young, modernized woman" (Ms. Han). However, Chang's character type as a mistress who is sexually involved with several men deviates from the principle of "*tongdo*" (the Eastern/Korean way whose mental sphere or morality is superior to the West). Unlike Choi Eun-Hee, whose star persona functions to reinforce the neo-Confucian rule of "one husband to the last," Chang Mi-Hee's star

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<sup>29</sup> Seungsook Moon, *Militarized Modernity and Gendered Citizenship in South Korea*, 19-21.

images represent a sex object shared by multiple men in the films. Whether it is her position as a social outcast (as in *The Home of Stars II*, *The Flower at the Equator*, and *Deep Blue Night*) or her own choice as the result of a traumatic experience (as in *Winter Woman*, *Night Markets*, and *Hwang Jin-ie*), each character that Chang Mi-Hee portrays becomes a sex object of different men in the process of the films' narratives. This is why Chang's films repeatedly refer to the trope of a mentally disabled, neurotic woman who eventually ends up being left alone or commits suicide. While representing decadent Western morals, Chang's characters are constantly subject to marginalization, isolation, punishment in the films.

### **A Modern-Day *Kisaeng*: Consoling Hopeless Masculinity**

As briefly mentioned in the previous section on the male gaze, the male characters in Chang's films depart from the glorified image of a virile soldier or the concept of tough, aggressive masculinity that was promoted under the military rule.<sup>30</sup> Particularly the male characters in three films, *Winter Woman*, *The Flower at the Equator*, and *Hwang Jin-ie*, represent effeminate, inefficient, and hopeless masculinity at a time when men were expected to be martial and productive. In *Winter Woman*, Yo-Sub signifies an infantile or feminized masculinity trapped in a domestic sphere. He makes a confession to Ewha (Chang's character) that as an only son from a rich family he has been isolated from his friends and society by his

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<sup>30</sup> For the discussion of the ideological construction of masculine subjectivity under the military rule, see "Mobilized to be Martial and Productive," in Seungsook Moon's *Militarized Modernity and Gendered Citizenship in South Korea*, 44-67.

overprotective and authoritative father. Confined in his room, Yo-Sub has been watching Ewha and fantasizing about her. Yet, Yo-Sub kills himself when he fails to fulfill his fantasy in the real life relationship with Ewha. When Ewha no longer allows Yo-Sub's self-centered voyeuristic desire, i.e., when she denies his symbolic power, Yo-Sub's fantasy along with his life comes to an end.<sup>31</sup>

*The Flower at the Equator* also tells the story of a failed male-centered fantasy. The first scene shows that Mr. M. lives on his father's money after quitting his fifth job. Alone in the apartment, Mr. M. starts observing Sun-Young (Chang), who seems to be his only connection to the world outside of his apartment. Within his fantasy, he creates Sun-Young's image as that of innocent Madonna, who happens to be born in a filthy world. He sends her flowers and a white dress as gifts, and invites her to the ballet of *Sleeping Beauty*. Yet, when Sun-Young turns out to be an unchaste woman as filthy as the world that he resents, Mr. M. drags her into a river and shouts at her, "Wash off your filthy body. You are a piece of dirty trash" (Bae Chang-Ho, 1983). However, this scene in which Mr. M. performs a sadistic punishment functions to reveal his own perversity and failed fantasy. At the end of the film, after Sun-Young has committed suicide, Mr. M. narrates, "I couldn't save Sun-Young's sick and troubled soul. She was like a blossom that I tried to bloom into a flower in this desert" (Bae, 1983). Seen through a psychoanalysis-informed reading, this narcissistic narration serves to display the male subject's lack of

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<sup>31</sup> Lee Myung-Hee analyzes the narratives of *Winter Woman* and *The Flower at the Equator* as "the failed phallo-centric fantasies" in her unpublished thesis, "A Study of the Representation of Femininity in Korean Cinema," (HanYang University, 1998), 9-13.

symbolic power and his hopeless masculinity, which is projected onto the images of woman in the film.<sup>32</sup>

Likewise, Duk-Bo in *Hwang Jin-ie* symbolizes powerless masculinity in the sense that he is neither able to engage with the social world nor to fulfill his self-centered voyeuristic desire. Duk-Bo's powerlessness results primarily from his social standing. As a shoemaker, he belongs to the lower class in the strictly class-based Chosŏn Dynasty (1392-1910). In the film, he never speaks or communicates with others, and he is depicted as lonely, poor, and suffering from lovesickness. Although he seems to possess symbolic power over Hwang Jin-ie (Chang) as a bearer of gazes,<sup>33</sup> his low social standing prevents him from fulfilling his fantasy in real life. He kills himself when realizing his helplessness upon hearing the news of Jin-ie's marriage to a gentry family.

The narratives of these three films ultimately serve to represent unsuccessful male-centered fantasies and masculinities in crisis. Chang's characters take up the position of comforting or consoling the effeminate, marginalized Korean male. It is worth noting that two of Chang's films, *Winter Woman*, and *Night Markets*, repeat the

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<sup>32</sup> Kaja Silverman, in her book, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (1988), provides a psychoanalytic analysis of the ways in which "the male subject 'proves' his symbolic potency through the repeated demonstration of the female subject's symbolic impotence" (24). Drawing on Laplanche and Pontalis, Silverman introduces the idea of "projection" as a psychoanalytic mode of refusal to recognize. According to Laplanche and Pontalis, "the subject sends out into the external world an image of something that exists in him in an unconscious way." The female subject's symbolic impotence, thus, can be read as a symptom of the male subject's attempt to recognize in the opposite sex that which he refuses to see in himself. In other words, the sense of crisis and lack, which the male subject experiences, is projected onto the images of women in film. In this regard, Silverman proposes to read the images of women as a symptom of the male condition (22-24).

<sup>33</sup> Duk-Bo's symbolic power emanates from the illusion that he is the subject of the gaze and controls what he sees (i.e., Hwang Jin-ie).

narrative structure of the myth around Hwang Jin-ie's life from Chosŏn Dynasty. Originally born into a gentry family, Hwang Jin-ie chose to lower her social status to become a kisaeng after the suicide of love-stricken Duk-Bo. Jin-ie accepted her fate as a comfort woman for everyman who wants her instead of a life as a wife of one man in a gentry family. Likewise, Ewha in *Winter Woman* and Seung-Ah in *Night Markets* are originally from upper-middle class families. After the traumatic experience (Yo-Sub's suicide in *Winter Woman*; and failure to enter a college, then a rape by a random man in *Night Markets*), Chang's characters decide to use their bodies to comfort and pleasure men. Seen in this view, the on-screen persona of Chang Mi-Hee portrays the image of a modern-day kisaeng who sacrifices herself to service men whose masculinities are in crisis.

It is also important to note that the majority of the films in which Chang stars during the 1970s and the 1980s are adaptations of best-selling novels of the time. Korean literature during the 1970s witnessed the coming of a new form of novel, which later came to be dubbed as "the middlebrow novel" {chunggansosŏl}. A number of young writers introduced the idea of "artistically popular novels," which are as artistic as highbrow novels while at the same time being as entertaining as vulgar popular novels.<sup>34</sup> These young writers aimed at producing creative and original stories that were enjoyable to the general public. Many of these middlebrow novels were first published in newspapers in a series format and then made into books

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<sup>34</sup> Cho Nam-Hyun, Categorizing Korean Novels in the 1970s, in Hyŏndae Munhak eds., *Hanguk Hyŏndae Munhaksa* (Hyŏndaemunhak, 1991), 381-382.

which became best-sellers. Among this new generation of writers were Cho Hae-II and Choi In-Ho. Cho Hae-II's best-selling novel, *Winter Woman* (1976), was made into a film in the following year. Choi In-Ho, one of the best-known middlebrow novel writers, produced numerous best-sellers in the 1970s and the 1980s.<sup>35</sup> A number of films that have constructed Chang Mi-Hee's star persona are based on Choi's novels and he actually wrote the screenplays of these films: *The Home of Stars II*, *The Flower at the Equator*, *Deep Blue Night*, and *Hwang Jin-ie* among others.<sup>36</sup> In this respect, the on-screen persona of Chang Mi-Hee is directly, but not solely, related to Choi In-Ho's view of women.

The middlebrow novels centered around "the uprooted," who got lost in the midst of rapid economic development and repressive dictatorship. These uprooted were social outcasts that the state-controlled industrialization project left behind.<sup>37</sup> Choi In-Ho sympathizes with the uprooted characters in his novels in a compassionate and empathetic way. Yet, his view of the female in these narratives seems biased. That is, the uprooted female in Choi's novels and films have no agency. It is always the male characters' desires that decide the female characters' fate. While identifying with the uprooted male, Choi seems to regard the female role

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 381.

<sup>36</sup> Choi In-Ho adapted his novels into the films, *The Home of Stars II*, *The Flower at the Equator*, and *Deep Blue Night*. He wrote the novel of *Hwang Jin-ie*, based on a famous story of Chosŏn kisaeng, Hwang Jin-ie, and then adapted it into a film.

<sup>37</sup> Cho Nam-Hyun, 384-385.

as that of comforting the male. Women are meaningful only in terms of their capacity to console uprooted males.

The female role of comforting the male character is also apparent in *Winter Woman*, the film adaptation of Cho Hae-Il's novel. Suk-Gi, an ice hockey player whom Ewha (Chang) dates in college, says explicitly to Ewha in the film, "Korean men are really stressed out these days. They are exhausted in the midst of fast-paced economic growth and political upheavals. Korean women should console them all equally" (Kim Ho-Sun, 1977). The social consciousness of the middlebrow novel foregrounds the shadowy side of economic growth in Korean society (e.g., the uprooted people as major characters), but this specific literary genre limits the female role to soothing the stress and crisis that the Korean male is seen to be undergoing. As a result, the popular adaptations of middlebrow novels during the 1970s and the 1980s have contributed to constructing Chang Mi-Hee's star persona as a modern-day *kisaeng* who comforts the uprooted male both emotionally and physically.

In contrast with Choi Eun-Hee's typical on-screen image as a traditional mother who sacrifices her desire for her family, Chang Mi-Hee represents a sexually active woman who drinks with different men and provides sexual services to them. Chang's character type as a modern-day *kisaeng*, however, shares similarity with Choi's persona in the sense that both star images correspond to the male dominant ideology that solicits female sacrifices for the advancement of masculine desires in Korean society. As discussed in the previous chapter about Choi Eun-Hee, the gendered discourses of anti-colonial Korean nationalism and the government's

industrialization project confer no autonomous subjectivity to Korean women. The modern Korean nation continues to interpellate the Korean male as its primary member in order to achieve the dual goal of building a militarily strong and rich nation in the 1970s and the 1980s. The military regimes under Park and Chun mobilized men to be martial and productive and women to be rational managers of the household. This discourse of normative membership of modern South Korea produced uprooted subjects who failed to conform to the norms. The masculine narratives and the male gaze, however, confer a crucial role to the uprooted female in Chang's films. The characters that Chang plays in *Winter Woman*, *Night Markets*, *The Flower at the Equator*, and *Hwang Jin-ie* are depicted as being willing to provide sexual services in order to console Korean men who are stressed out and exhausted in the midst of fast-paced economic growth and political upheavals.

Relying on Spivak's concept of the subaltern, I argue that the comfort woman that Chang Mi-Hee embodies involves two different, but interlocking, accounts of her predicament. The discursive technique of Korean nationalism is to protect and supervise her because she is mentally ill and does not conform to a feminine norm. The argument by the uprooted Korean male (along with male writers and directors) is that she actually wants and chooses to be a comfort woman in order to console the tired and powerless Korean men. In both cases, the voice of the comfort woman can only be spoken for or represented in distorted or interested fashion by others. Both discursive techniques, however, work in collusion with each other in Chang's films. That is, the uprooted male subjects carry out the role of protecting, supervising, and



even punishing Chang's characters (on behalf of the nation). The uprooted males' treatments of Chang's characters also share a similarity with modern South Korea's ambivalent positions toward Western/American culture. The male characters' desire for (within their self-centered fantasies) and contempt toward Chang's characters (at the realization of their failed fantasies) resemble the modern South Korean self's aspiration for (the material sphere) and rejection of (the mental sphere) the West/the US. In this sense, Chang's star persona emerges as a site of contestation where a set of ideas about femininity and membership of the nation are created, contradicted, and negotiated within the complex discursive system of Confucian patriarchy, capitalist patriarchy, androcentric nationalism, militarism, and development ideology.

### **"She Is So Fake"**

During the focus group interviews, the participants, particularly the Korean middle-aged women in group two, expressed negative reactions to Chang Mi-Hee. The explanations given for these feelings were, in most part, formulated more through Chang's off-screen persona than her on-screen persona. The responses from group two focused on Chang's arrogance and perceived fakeness. Ms. Kang, a restaurant owner in Korea, said, "I can't understand her...how can she live a fake life like that? She is *so fake*...especially the ways she talks, the ways she poses in a pretentious manner during interviews. She fabricates her voice." Ms. Kim, a college instructor, echoed this sentiment, "I don't like her. She is not a likable person. *How unnatural*

she is! She thinks she is a princess or queen or something.” Ms. Han, a Korean housewife and mother, also concurred, “She is so full of herself.”

It is important to point out that I conducted these focus group interviews more than two decades after Chang had emerged as a film star. As a result, the interviewees’ critical assessment of Chang is potentially affected by many sources other than just the films in which Chang starred that have accumulated over the course of almost thirty years. During the 1970s there was an influx of tabloid and gossip columns in popular magazines and entertainment newspapers. These tabloid and gossip columns focused on star scandals and behind-the-scenes stories that exposed the private lives of stars. They also inserted pin-up photos of female stars. In addition, a number of columns frequently evaluated the female stars’ bodies and their sexual appeal.<sup>38</sup> Chang Mi-Hee tended to receive less favorable reviews in terms of her sex appeal and her private life. The columnists were predominantly male and they often found fault with her body image. For instance, these criticisms include “her body is all right but the torso is too long,” “Chang Mi-Hee can be sexy but lacks sensuality,” “Chang Mi-Hee has passionate facial expressions but she seems to have cold body temperature.” Columnists also reported on Chang’s off-screen life focusing on her arrogant manners in interacting with people around her as well as her relationship with her mother who addressed Chang as “our princess.”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Lee Ho-Geol, 29.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 62-63.

Furthermore, Chang Mi-Hee remained single, which in turn made her an easy target for scandals due to the constant speculation regarding the various reasons for her staying unmarried. She worked closely with a director, Bae Chang-Ho, in a number of films during the 1980s. A popular rumor circulated that Bae fell in love with Chang while making films with her, and proposed to her, but she was too arrogant to accept his proposal. These unfavorable attitudes in the tabloid and gossip magazines toward Chang Mi-Hee result from her on-screen image as a lonely neurotic woman, combined with male columnists' impressions about her as being self-important and snobbish in real life. During the mid 1980s, Chang had to endure a vicious rumor, which was that president Chun Doo-Hwan committed adultery with her. When the first lady found out about it, she reportedly warned Chang to stay away from her husband. A more vicious version details how the first lady kidnapped Chang, physically threatened her, and then kicked her out of the country.<sup>40</sup> This type of ill-spirited scandals and gossip about Chang has been widely circulated in Korea.

The Korean middle-aged women in group two referred to these scandals and gossip during the focus group interview, which functioned to reinforce their negative impressions of Chang:

**Ms. Hong:** She thinks she is above everybody else. That's why she couldn't get married, I think. [She is] too arrogant, too cold...She is not the type of woman that men like.

**Ms. Kim:** Chun Doo-Hwan liked her, though.

**Group:** (laughter)

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 70

**Ms. Shin:** Bae Chang-Ho liked her, too. He proposed to her, but she rejected. If she was a *true* actress, she should have got married to Bae Chang-Ho and kept making films together.

**Ms. Lee:** She is so shallow.

It is interesting that Chang's off-screen life bears a resemblance to her on-screen character type and narrative treatment of her characters. Just as in her films, she became an erotic object by different men in real life, i.e., the male writers for tabloids (although they were unfavorable), the director Bae Chang-Ho, and president Chun Doo-Hwan. Much like her filmic characters, who were alone and wandered through their lives, Chang became isolated by Korean society through scandalous stories and eventually left her own country. However, unlike the conventional narrative conclusions of her films, Chang did not end up as a fallen woman in the street. Whether she was forcefully expelled from her own country (by the first lady as the rumor has it) or she voluntarily left, Chang went to the US to study acting and education. When she came back to Korea a few years later, she became a professor at Myöngji College in Seoul. She has been teaching acting at the college and she is regarded as a great source for information about the Korean film and media industry of the 1970s and the 1980s.

While the respondents in group two were very critical of Chang's images as illustrated above, the Korean-American middle-aged women in group one demonstrated positive or neutral responses to Chang in regards to their general impressions and evaluations of her. These responses were very short and simple: "she is pretty, maybe not in terms of traditional standards, but she seems okay. She has the image of a modern...Westernized woman" (Ms. Evans); "she is like a

fashionable modern woman, especially her hairstyle. That hairstyle (short barbed hair) was very popular back then” (Ms. Davis); “she looks very modern and sophisticated in films” (Ms. Taylor). Most of the members of group one left Korea and came to the United States during the 1970s. Considering that Chang became a major film star in the 1980s, the interviewees in group one had little exposure to the gossip and scandals discussed above. Thus, it is apparently not the character type or performance per se that affect the interviewees’ evaluations of stars but rather the off-screen images formulated and circulated through publicity documents, gossip, etc. play an integral role in influencing how the members of group two (Korean middle-aged women) regarded Chang.

Another factor that played into the negative evaluations of Chang’s images by the participants of group two (Korean middle-aged women) is related to these women’s shared experience or memories of the industrialization process in Korea. Ms. Kim, a college instructor in Seoul, talked about a female type that she regarded as having played a positive and crucial role in the economic development of modern South Korea. Ms. Kim commented:

“To me, the more representative, valuable female type of the 1970s and 1980s [than Chang Mi-Hee’s mistress type] is that of *kongsuni*. [They] worked really hard, sacrificing themselves for their families and for the country. Actually, our country’s economic growth was built on those *kongsunis*’ labor and sacrifices.”

Ms. Lee, Ms. Kang, and Ms. Shin conveyed their agreement with Ms. Kim by nodding their heads. *Kongsuni* is a Korean term produced during a period of dramatic urban-centered development and industrialization in Korea during the

1970s. Often derogatorily used, the term refers to a group of female factory workers for labor-intensive, low-paying manufacturing industries such as textiles and textile-related industries.<sup>41</sup> These Korean women's recognition of *kongsuni*'s contribution to national economic development parallels, in part, Bryan Turner's argument on the transformation of social meanings of female bodies under capitalism. Turner maintains that the notion of a desiring female body has changed from a "reproductive body" in traditional, pre-industrial society, to a "labouring body" in the industrial period, and finally to a "consuming body" in the post-industrial stage.<sup>42</sup> I have argued in the previous chapter that the notion of the asexual mother type that Choi Eun-Hee embodies corresponds to the idea of a desiring female body in the pre-industrial stage. *Kongsuni*'s laboring body, however, does not represent the desirable female body in the context of South Korea's industrial economy. However useful her body was for the purpose of industrializing and strengthening the Korean economy, the female factory worker was only to represent a cheap, temporary, secondary source of labor while the Korean male was interpellated as the principal labor force and the Korean female as the modern housewife.

Both female types of the *kongsuni* and the neurotic, desperate mistress/wanderer that Chang portrays in films depart from the normative feminine role for which industrializing, militarized South Korea called during the 1970s and

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<sup>41</sup> These were young women mostly in their twenties who migrated from rural areas looking for jobs and who ended up being confined to low-paying factory jobs in Seoul working under extremely exploitative conditions throughout the 1970s and the 1980s.

<sup>42</sup> Bryan Turner, *The Body and Society: Explorations in Social Theory* (Sage, 1996), 3-5.

the 1980s. Yet, the interviewees in group two viewed the female factory worker's manual labor as more valuable and legitimate than Chang Mi-Hee's sexual labor. I argue that the interviewees' identity as housewives play into their negative responses to Chang because, from their point-of-view, Chang represents dangerous sexuality and a mistress, which falls on the other side of the opposing binary of feminine roles or types (i.e., the tension between wife and mistress).

As time progressed during the interview session, however, the reactions of the Korean women in group two in regards to Chang changed from that of criticism to compassion and empathy. As the women in this group stepped back from the character roles and types that Chang played and began to talk about the historical period of her stardom, they viewed Chang as a victim of the male dominated society in general and the film/media industry in particular. They addressed their concern and sympathy for Chang on the grounds of the historical and social context of her stardom. For example, Ms. Kim, a college instructor in Seoul, offered the following response: "[Chang] was inherently a talented actress. But she couldn't help but follow male writers' or male directors' directions or orders. I think that's understandable. It would have been hard to go against their directions as an actress at that time. [She was] kind of a victim." Similarly, Ms. Shin, a music teacher in the same group, commented:

"The 1970s and the 1980s were the dark eras for Korean cinema. The entire society was undergoing dark eras...due to Park Jung-Hee...and Chun Doo-Whan. Bae Chang-Ho was a good director, but he was only a man....Poor Chang Mi-Hee...I don't like her, but I sympathize with her. She couldn't display her talent completely."

These two women (Ms. Kim and Ms. Shin) sympathized with Chang because they regarded her as a victim of the patriarchal society and film industry in Korea. Their sympathy with Chang stemmed from the perception of her restricted status as a female star operating under the repressive system. I argue that Korean women who lived within the socio-historical context of Chang's stardom were able to easily identify with the star's position due to their shared experiences of the repressive patriarchal system and military dictatorship in Korea. However, this identification is contradicted by their critical evaluations of Chang's off-screen images. As a result, the respondents' ultimate assessment of Chang involves a negotiation between these two factors (shared life experience, gossip and scandal).

### **“We Went Sightseeing To The Theatre”**

During the focus group interview sessions, the members of both groups one and two spoke of the issue of visual pleasure in Korean cinema while focusing on the same specific Korean phrase that refers to the practice of cinema-going in groups, “to go sightseeing to the theatre” {keukchang kugyŏng kada}. The respondents of groups one and two shared interesting memories of going to the movies in groups with their female friends in Korea. When I asked my interviewees in group one (Korean-American middle-aged women) about why they would go to see Korean movies that centered around masculine desires and what kind of pleasure they derived from such masculine narratives, they talked about their collective viewing practices in Korea. The act of collective viewing and the associated pleasure made any films (e.g., male-



centered, depressing, or violent films) enjoyable for these women. The responses below by the participants in groups one and two illustrate that the film text (including the star and the narrative) was not the sole source of their pleasure in their overall experience of “going sightseeing to the theatre.”

Ms. Evans, a store manager in Kansas, said, “you know, in old times, when we were young, we used to say ‘let’s go sightseeing to the theatre.’” Other members in group one all nodded while some of them saying, “yeah, that’s right.” Ms. Evans explained with excitement:

“So, we went sightseeing to the theatre, so to speak. When I was in high school and in college, five or six of my girlfriends and I would flock together to the movies when we heard somebody saying a certain movie was good. Of course the content of the film was important, but just the idea of going out to the movie theatre with my friends made us happy. So, it’s not just about the movie. It’s the whole experience. For example, we could go to the bakery, a coffee shop, or a restaurant, sit there and chat for hours and hours [after the movie]. The fun was in the chatting.”

Ms. Allen, a Korean-American housewife and mother, added:

“Yeah, right. But, for me, it didn’t even matter what the movie was about. I remember that I went to the movies in order to cry. I used to like sad movies or tearjerkers {ch’oerusŏng yŏnghwa} back then... So, my girlfriends and I would bring handkerchiefs or Kleenex, and just cry and cry until we got a headache.”

Then, the members of group two started naming and reminiscing about specific Korean tearjerkers.

“To go sightseeing to the theatre” is a phrase commonly used until the 1970s among Korean audiences.<sup>43</sup> While this practice was not limited to female audiences,

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<sup>43</sup> Before the 1980s in Korean society, theatres did not solely screen films. Byn Jae-Ran provides in her doctoral dissertation a table showing the use of theatres (built before 1963) in Seoul in 1976. In

the interviewees related it to their memories of watching movies with their female friends. For these women, the idea or act of going out to the movies (including the sense of sharing the movie-watching experience and the act of chatting about the film afterwards) functioned as a vent for them in their everyday lives and thus, became a great source of pleasure. It also provided an outlet for the women to release their repressed emotions by watching tearjerkers with their female friends as Ms. Allen remembered. Tearjerkers, as a generic term in Korean cinema, correspond to the woman's film in American cinema.<sup>44</sup> They typically targeted female audiences, which were labeled as "the rubber shoes"<sup>45</sup> audience" {komusin kwangaek} or "the handkerchief army" {sonsugŏn pudae}. These degraded terms referred to female audiences who metaphorically wore rubber shoes and who were armed with handkerchiefs.<sup>46</sup> Although degrading terms, they indicate the significant practice of group viewing shared by many Korean female audiences.

However, these collective viewing practices of Korean females were not limited to tearjerkers starring a female heroine and focusing on women's issues and

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this table, twenty eight of the seventy six theatres were also used for theatrical plays or musical performances in 1976. Therefore, "to go sightseeing to the theatre" could mean going to see theatrical or musical performances in some cases. However, in majority of cases, the phrase referred to going to the movies, often used to include the overall experience of cinema-going. See Byun Jae-Ran's doctoral dissertation, *A Study of Female Audiences' Film Viewing Experiences in Korean Film History* (Joong Ang University, 2000).

<sup>44</sup> In regards to the issue of woman's film in Korea, see Soyoung Kim, "Questions of Woman's Film: *The Maid, Madame Freedom, and Women*," in *South Korean Golden Age Melodrama: Gender, Genre, and National Cinema*, ed. Kathleen McHugh and Nancy Abelmann (Wayne State University Press, 2005), 185-200.

<sup>45</sup> Rubber shoes, a form of inexpensive footwear made of rubber, is a signifier of working-class or common women.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

desires. As the responses by the members of groups one and two illustrate, they were able to find pleasure in various kinds of films. According to Ms. Han, who is a Korean housewife and mother:

“I went to a girls’ high school and I was a kind of trouble-maker (laughs). So, a few of my friends and I, the so-called *rebels* {bullyang haksang} in our school, would sneak in the movie theatre to see a R-rated or X-rated movie and then come to school next day and show off about it. So, the fun was about [the fact that] we saw what we were not supposed to, and the whole experience of going out together with my friends.”

Ms. Lee, a Korean housewife and mother, also remembered this practice:

“Yeah, I remember going sightseeing to the theatre with my girlfriends. We used to do that on a regular basis, like once a month. Sometimes, the content or the story of the movies didn’t even matter to us. We didn’t care. I mean, it’s not that we didn’t care at all about what movie we were going to see. It’s just that we were definitely going out to see some movies and we did that every month. So, it’s not like we decided to meet in order to see a particular movie.”

Ms. Hong, another Korean housewife and mother in the same group, concurred:

“I have a similar experience. My girlfriends and I always had fun no matter what the movie was about. So, it doesn’t matter whether we liked Chang Mi-Hee or not, it doesn’t matter how depressing the movie was, or how violent it was towards women. We had fun anyway.”

The middle-aged women (both Korean-American and Korean women) that I interviewed discussed their shared experiences and pleasure stemming from these group-viewing practices. In contrast, the members of the other two focus groups (Korean-American and Korean young females in their twenties) indicated that they would go to the movies with their boyfriends and did not mention going to the theater in groups with their female friends. This indicates a shift away from the group-viewing experience of older generations of Korean women towards a more couple-

oriented viewing practice in younger generations. In fact, Ms. Green in group one observed, “I don’t think today’s younger generation does that [going to the theatre in groups] any more. They are so individualistic. We became, I mean, the whole culture has become so individualistic.”

During the focus group interviews with the Korean-American and Korean middle-aged women in regards to Chang Mi-Hee’s star images, the interviewees talked in a very critical fashion about the masculine narrative, the male gaze, and female objectifications in Chang’s films. As illustrated above, however, such extra-textual elements as collective viewing practices played a crucial role in these women’s experience of pleasure regardless of the films’ narratives or the controlling male gaze. In other words, these practices allowed them to enjoy Chang’s films despite the presence of violence and sadistic acts against women. Moreover, as Ms. Hong in group two indicated, the group-viewing experience made Chang’s films enjoyable even though they did not like the star, due to the act of going out and sharing viewing experiences with their female friends.

Chang’s star personae as a desperate mistress, a mentally disabled wanderer, and a modern-day *kisaeng* involve the hegemonic formation of femininity in industrializing, militarized South Korea. The ideas of desirable and undesirable femininities take on new meaning through the processes of re-writing and over-writing while different ideologies (e.g., state-nationalism, military dictatorship, Confucian and capitalist patriarchies, the ideology of *tongdoso*) in collusion with commercial strategies (e.g., the film industry, popular literary genre and its film

adaptations) fight for hegemony. Within these multi-layered and overlapping ideological discourses, Chang is constructed as an undesirable female who does not conform to a normative feminine role, and a subaltern subject who does not have a speaking position but rather is spoken for by others' ideological positions. The star images of Chang Mi-Hee also play out differing and often conflicting emotions and evaluations among the female audiences that I interviewed. The members of both groups one and two identified the feeling of anxiety that Chang's star persona evoked (i.e., the tension between wife and mistress) while at the same time they were very vocal about criticizing the voyeuristic, controlling male gaze in Chang's films. The members of group two (Korean women) further conveyed their negative responses to Chang for her fakeness; on the other hand, they sympathized with Chang based on their shared experience of the repressive social and political system. In this sense, Chang's star images reveal the contradictions operating within the dominant discourses rather than resolving them. I have tried to pay attention to these contradictions along with the ambivalent feelings and attitudes that such contradictions create in analyzing dominant discourses around Chang's on-screen and off-screen personae.

## **V. Jun Ji-Hyun (1981- ): Asia's Beloved Sassy Girl**

This chapter examines the images of the Korean female film star, Jun Ji-Hyun, focusing on her on-screen and off-screen personae and her transnational stardom in Asia. Jun Ji-Hyun portrays a sassy and domineering girl but at the same time a pure-hearted girl. At the domestic level, Jun emerged as a star in the context of economically and politically turbulent years, in which Korean society was heading toward a more open and democratic society while both dealing with economic crisis and the implementation of a peaceful relationship with North Korea. At the regional level, her transnational stardom is situated within the burgeoning of Korean popular culture across Asia with the advent of global capitalism, which may signify a formation of pan-Asian culture. This chapter focuses on Jun's star images in relation to the construction of femininity and female sexuality in the context of Korean society during the late 1990s and the early 2000s as well as the changing landscape of the transnational flow of cultural objects in contemporary Asia.

The historical period of Jun's stardom marks an era of an increasingly pluralist environment as well as an exploding consumer and popular culture in Korean society. Kim Young-Sam, a civilian politician, came to office in South Korea in 1993 for the first time since the 1961 military coup, thereby ending thirty-two years of rule by army generals. The newly elected President Kim initiated democratic and anti-corruption reforms toward a "kinder and gentler government" and replaced

key military leaders in an effort to reestablish civilian control of the military.<sup>1</sup> The actual process of change, however, turned out to be slow and ineffective. The Korean economy went through a recession at the end of 1997 as the Asian financial crisis hit the country hard.

Kim Dae-Jung was elected to the presidency in 1998 in the midst of this unprecedented financial crisis and began vigorous economic reforms recommended by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). President Kim also pushed forward reconciliation with North Korea through what came to be known as the Sunshine Policy. This peaceful cooperation and open-ended engagement with the North (with no set formulas for reunification) resulted in the inter-Korean summit meeting in Pyöngyang in 2000.<sup>2</sup> During the presidency of Kim Dae-Jung (1998-2003), South Koreans strived to pull their country back from the brink of bankruptcy. Ironically, while South Korea underwent economic depression, its popular culture enjoyed enormous popularity across many Asian countries. “Hallyu,” whose literal meaning is the Korean Wave, refers to this recent cultural phenomenon since the mid 1990s, in which South Korea’s popular culture products such as music, films, and TV soap operas have been sensationally popular across national borders throughout Asia. Coinciding with this transnational cultural flow, Jun turned into a popular icon not

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<sup>1</sup> Han-Kyo Kim, Politics in South Korea Since 1993, in John H. Koo and Andrew C. Nahm, eds., *An Introduction to Korean Culture* (Hollym, 1997), 248-253.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Robinson, *Korea’s Twentieth-Century Odyssey: A Short History*, 179-80

only in Korea but also in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Japan after the huge commercial success of the film, *My Sassy Girl* (2001),<sup>3</sup> in these countries.

Jun has starred in eight films thus far: *White Valentine* [*Hwait'ŭ Pallent'ain*] (1999), *Il Mare* [*Siwŏlŭae*] (2000), *My Sassy Girl* [*Yŏpkijŏgin Kŭnyŏ*] (2001), *The Uninvited* [*Sainyong Sikt'ak*] (2003), *Windstruck* [*Nae Yŏja Ch'ingurŭl Sogaehamnida*] (2004), *Daisy* [*Teiji*] (2006), *If I Were a Superman* [*Sup'ŏmaeniŏttŏn Sana'i*] (2008), and *Blood: The Last Vampire* [*Pŭllŏdŭ: Lastŭ Paemp'aiŏ*] (2008).

These films are romantic comedies or melodramas (with exceptions of a horror film, *The Uninvited*, and a action/horror/thriller, *Blood: The Last Vampire*).<sup>4</sup> In this chapter, I focus on five films, which construct her star persona as both a sassy and pure-hearted girl: *White Valentine* (1999), *Il Mare* (2000), *My Sassy Girl* (2001), *Windstruck* (2004), *Daisy* (2006).

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<sup>3</sup> A Hollywood remake of this film is currently in production under the same title, *My Sassy Girl*. Elisha Cuthbert plays the role of sassy girl.

<sup>4</sup> Often labeled as the next Zhang Ziyi by the South Korean Media, Jun Ji-Hyun recently accepted the opportunity to star in a Hollywood film, *Blood Vampire*. This film is based on a Japanese anime, *Blood: The Last Vampire*, and scheduled to be released in American theaters in 2008.



### **A Sassy and Quirky Girl: Re-Gendering Femininity**

What distinguishes Jun Ji-Hyun from most of the female film stars from previous eras, including Choi Eun-Hee and Chang Mi-Hee, is that Jun's images reverse gender expectations through the "sassy" and "quirky" personality of the characters she plays.<sup>5</sup> Her on-screen images as the sassy and quirky girl is primarily constructed through two films: *My Sassy Girl* and *Windstruck*. Jun Ji-Hyun's image in these two films is so radically different from the virtuous female type (e.g., the obedient, self-sacrificial, self-effacing female), which both Korean society and Korean cinema have upheld for a long time, that it created a variety of debates about whether it signified a new subversive female type in Korea.<sup>6</sup>

Since the 1990s, as the social and economic status of women generally improved in Korean society, the representations of women in film reflect these changing female roles. For instance, a number of Korean films have portrayed female characters who are financially and emotionally independent of the patriarchal family, and who are in charge of their own sexuality (i.e., these female characters are free from the sexual constraints resulting from gender norms in South Korean society). These female characters are professional women functioning outside of

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<sup>5</sup> The use of "sassy" will be used throughout this chapter to describe Jun's on-screen persona in *My Sassy Girl* and *Windstruck*, which is characterized by an opinionated, authoritative, and domineering quality. Likewise, "quirky" will be used to describe the eccentric, wacky, and unconventional nature of her persona in these films.

<sup>6</sup> The scholars who participated in these debates include Kim Min-Young, Kim So-Young, Park Eun-Young, and Sung Baek-Yup. See bibliography.

traditional family values.<sup>7</sup> During the early 2000s, a variety of media texts such as TV dramas and TV commercials rushed to represent strong and independent women, in contrast to the submissive and sacrificial female characters from the previous eras.<sup>8</sup> Jun Ji-Hyun's stardom coincides with this representational trend in Korean popular culture. More correctly, as a popular icon, she has been a leading figure in this cultural trend. After the commercial success of *My Sassy Girl* she starred in films and television commercials in which she portrays a loud, physical, and domineering girl based on her "sassy" girl image.

*My Sassy Girl* is based on a series of stories that a college student uploaded to the "humor board" of a website in 1999 in Korea. In this boy-meets-girl story, the author recounts his own dating saga with his "quirky" girlfriend through first-person narration. This story, based on true incidents and written by an amateur writer, became phenomenally popular among Internet users in Korea.<sup>9</sup> It was adapted into a film in 2001 with Jun Ji-Hyun playing the role of the "sassy" girlfriend.<sup>10</sup> Jun's character is not given a name and is only referred to as "she" in this romantic comedy. In the beginning of the film, the male character, Kyun-Woo, sees Jun's drunken and staggering character in a subway, where she throws up on another

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<sup>7</sup> Kim Bok-Hee, A Study of the Representations of Femininity in Korean Romantic Comedies in the 1990s, Unpublished Thesis (Kyemung University, 1995), 29-31.

<sup>8</sup> Sung Baek-Yup, A Study of the Strong Woman Images in Korean Cinema, Unpublished Thesis (Seokang University, 2002), 15-16.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>10</sup> After the commercial success of *My Sassy Girl* the word "sassy" entered the cultural lexicon in Korea as a popular modifier in everyday life to describe things of any unconventional nature.

passenger. Before she passes out, she turns toward Kyun-Woo, calling him “honey.” Although a stranger to her, Kyun-Woo plays along as her boyfriend and carries her to a motel. The next day, “she” calls his cell phone and suggests they meet. In the scene where they meet, she talks to him in a very authoritative and non-apologetic way: “What do you want to eat?” “What happened last night? Stop mumbling!” “You pay for my drink.” She even interferes with other people (an old man and teenage girls) at the table next to them, saying to the man, “Having fun, huh? Don’t you have a daughter? Why do you live a life like that?” (Kwak Jae-Yong, 2001).

In spite of her “quirky” personality, Kyun-Woo finds her attractive. What he likes about her is her long straight hair and her flashes of femininity. However, during their unconventional courtship, this young couple displays reversed gender roles. Jun’s character not only takes the lead in their relationship through her authoritative mode of speaking but she also physically surpasses him at sports such as racquetball and fencing. Moreover, her behavior (e.g., drinking heavily, passing out in the middle of the street, and often hitting and kicking Kyun-Woo) runs contrary to Korean gender norms in which a girl is expected to carry herself with grace and decency. This reversal of gender norms also applies to Kyun-Woo who appears effeminate and submissive (i.e., characteristics often attributed to women in Korean society). Kyun-Woo tells the audience about being raised as a girl (e.g., wearing girl’s clothes) because his mother wanted a daughter. He takes orders from Jun’s character, does whatever she tells him, and is willing to comfort and care for his

drunken girlfriend. Moreover, he never makes any sexual advances to Jun's character throughout the film.

This reverse of gender expectations is also apparent in the fictional stories that Jun's character creates in the film. As an aspiring screenwriter, "she" tells Kyun-Woo of the stories she writes, which are visualized in the film. Her first scenario tells the story of a female who comes from the future to save her boyfriend in danger. In this short action narrative, which is a parody of *The Terminator*, Jun Ji-Hyun plays the role of the female terminator-type while Kyun-Woo stars as a helpless boyfriend. Her second screenplay is an adaptation from a famous Korean short novel, *Shower*, which is a beautiful story about platonic love between a teenage girl and boy. The story ends with the death of the girl whose last wish is to be buried with the shirt that she wore when the boy carried her on his back. In *My Sassy Girl*, Jun Ji-Hyun's character maintains that the original ending is so old-fashioned that it should be changed so that the boy, and not the shirt, is buried alive with the girl. Her shockingly "sassy" imagination is also evident in her third screenplay, which is a time-travel martial-arts narrative. She stars as a female warrior from the future, who travels to the past for revenge. She is dressed like a man, and at the final duel scene, she brutally kills a character, who is played by Kyun-Woo.

*Windstruck* repeats the reversed gender roles in a similar way to that of *My Sassy Girl*. After the huge success of *My Sassy Girl* at the box-office in many Asian countries, Korean and Hong Kong film companies co-produced *Windstruck* in the hope of bigger box-office receipts in Asia by capitalizing on the status of Jun Ji-Hyun

as a national celebrity in these countries.<sup>11</sup> The director of *My Sassy Girl*, Kwak Jae-Yong, wrote the role of Kyung-Jin in *Windstruck* for Jun Ji-Hyun. While the film primarily relies on Jun's star images, she plays the role of a "quirky" female police officer, Kyung-Jin.

The film centers on the idiosyncratic happenings in a love story between Kyung-Jin and Myung-Woo, who is a physics teacher in an all-girls high school. One day, Kyung-Jin mistakenly arrests him as a pickpocket. Dragged to the police station, the innocent Myung-Woo asks her to apologize to him. She unabashedly reverts, "The word apology is not in my dictionary. If you want to hear me saying, 'I'm sorry,' change your name to 'I'm sorry'" (Kwak, 2003). A few days later, Myung-Woo comes across her again in the police station while disciplining juvenile delinquents from his school. Kyung-Jin handcuffs him to her body so that they can go after a suspicious drug trafficker, and Myung-Woo and Kyung-Jin gradually fall in love. Myung-Woo is concerned about the safety of his "quirky" girlfriend while she is on duty; therefore, he voluntarily follows her while she is on patrol in order to protect her. Yet, often times, he finds himself in danger and in need of his girlfriend to rescue him. Ultimately, Myung-Woo dies during his volunteer police duty after Kyung Jin shoots him by mistake. The sad and distressed Kyung-Jin wanders around and eventually bumps into a man, played by the same actor that played the role of

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<sup>11</sup> Park Eun-Young, "A Review of *Windstruck*," Cine 21, June 2004.

Kyun-Woo in *My Sassy Girl*. In this sense, *Windstruck* can be seen as a prequel to *My Sassy Girl*.

*Windstruck* demonstrates the reversal of gender expectations in the same manner as in *My Sassy Girl*. Kyung-Jin is not at all a desirable feminine character in the traditional sense. She is a “quirky” tomboy who is as reckless and “sassy” as Jun’s character in *My Sassy Girl*. She is loud and violent, often using her physical power. By contrast, her boyfriend, Myung-Woo, is effeminate, weak, and submissive. His romantic personality puts him in danger regardless of his intention to protect his girlfriend. He loves his “quirky” girlfriend and is likely to do anything for her. In this regard, the gender roles portrayed in *My Sassy Girl* and *Windstruck* seem to swap the characteristics traditionally associated with masculinity and femininity in Korean society as well as in Asian societies in general.

The Korean scholar, Kim Hyun-Mi, argues that the reversal of gender roles in the Korean Wave reflects the notion of “gender instability” that characterizes the experience of a new modern sensibility in contemporary Asia. According to Kim, the Korean Wave is a cultural phenomenon that manifests the strong desires of Asian people to destabilize and change gender relations within their current social orders.<sup>12</sup> Seen in this view, Jun Ji-Hyun may appeal to the audience across Asia because of her persona as a “sassy” and “quirky” girl, which is at odds with the traditional gender expectation in Korea and in Asian countries. Indeed, the male characters in Jun’s

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<sup>12</sup> Kim Hyun-Mi, *Kŭllobŏl Sidaeŭi Munhwabŏnyŏk* [*Cultural Translation in a Global Age*] (Ttohanaŭi Munhwa, 2006), 242-244.

films represent romantic, sensitive, and loyal boyfriends that are far from the image of a martial and productive Korean male promoted by the military regimes.

Yet, it is a mistake to consider Jun's star images as a step forward in terms of presenting a strong and autonomous female subject. While Jun's characters ostensibly seem to reverse established gender norms, her on-screen persona still embodies a stereotypical female role. For instance, the characters she plays in films always display physical beauty with her thin, feminine body and her long straight hair, which is her trademark. Moreover, as I cover later, the narratives of her films repeatedly reinforce her images as a pure girl emphasizing her feminine quality underneath her "quirky" personality.

While responding to Jun Ji-Hyun's typical image in *My Sassy Girl* and *Windstruck*, the young Korean females in group four regarded Jun as an embodiment of the ideal girlfriend type. Jung-Mi, a twenty-one year old college student in Seoul, said, "I think Korean men categorize women in terms of two types: the women they want to marry and the women they want to date. Jun Ji-Hyun is like the latter type, a typical girlfriend type." Tae-Hee in the same group responded to Jung-Mi and added, "Yeah, you know, Jun Ji-Hyun ranked at the top of a survey that asked which celebrities [Korean] men most wanted to date. [This represents how Jun is] maybe, not suitable for a wife, but perfect to have fun with."

The young Korean-American females in group three regarded Jun's typical character type in a similar fashion. Kate, a twenty-year old college student in Kansas, commented, "Jun Ji-Hyun is like a cool girlfriend who is good to hang out with and to

have fun with.” Elaine also interpreted Jun as a girlfriend type, saying, “she’s not exactly the type [of woman] a Korean man would want to introduce to his mom (laughs) but she is pretty, funny, and cool. She represents a pure girl and the girl next door [who is] having a good time.”

However, Jun’s image as an ideal girlfriend type represents a girl before marriage as opposed to being outside of marriage as in the case with a mistress type that Chang Mi-Hee portrays, and this type of girl has the potential to become a good wife, i.e., a wife-to-be. As Helen, the interviewee who was most familiar with Jun Ji-Hyun in group three, put it, “[Jun] is like a pure girl, but not normal, you know, kind of a domineering type, not like a wife type exactly, but I think she can become a good wife if she meets a right guy.” Yu-Mi, a Korean college student in group four, shared this sentiment:

“I think she will eventually become a good wife. I think she can be such a sassy, loud girl because she is a young college student [in *My Sassy Girl*]. You know, once a girl gets married, her life totally changes...when she has a husband and kids. At the end of the film, she appears very feminine and obedient, like an ugly duckling turns into something, like *ta da*, she turns out to be a good candidate for Kyun-Woo’s (the male character) wife.”

While Jun’s characters exude tough and reckless personalities on the outside, they are revealed to be soft and feminine inside.<sup>13</sup> Jun’s personality in *My Sassy Girl* hides the deep sorrow that emanates from the death of her former boyfriend. In fact, the interior motives of her “quirky” actions conceal the grief and heartbreak deep inside her. Thus, the film portrays conflicting notions of femininity while utilizing

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<sup>13</sup> Ko Jong-Suk, “A Review of *My Sassy Girl*,” Cine 21, August 2001.



two different generic conventions of comedy and melodrama. The scenes, which serve to reverse gender expectations, tend to exaggerate the sassiness of Jun's character towards comical effects. On the other hand, the scenes, which demonstrate the feminine side of Jun's character, are likely to emphasize the melodramatic aspects of her mourning for the dead ex-boyfriend. In this sense, the mixture of the two film genres, comedy and melodrama, enables this implausible coexistence of the two different female types within Jun's character.<sup>14</sup>

The awkward coexistence of the conflicting notions of femininity functions to prevent Jun's characters from maturing into a woman in these films. In other words, Jun's character in *My Sassy Girl* remains a tomboy-like girl who never recovers from the traumatic experience of losing her boyfriend. Furthermore, *Windstruck* utilizes the conventions of a weepy melodrama in a more blatant way. The film forces Kyung-Jin (Jun) to deal with two traumatic experiences: first, the death of her twin sister; second, the death of her boyfriend, Myung-Woo. The film's narrative focuses on Kyung-Jin's emotional breakdown and vulnerability instead of her recuperating and moving on with her life.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, the seemingly reversed gender roles in *My Sassy Girl* and *Windstruck* fail to truly overturn the gender stereotypes due to their conflicts with Jun's image as a pure girl who is inherently soft and feminine and who has not recovered from her lost love.

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<sup>14</sup> Sung Baek-Yup, 30-32.

<sup>15</sup> Kim Min-Young, *Cine 21*

### **A Perpetual Pure-Hearted Girl: Re-Claiming Virginity**

The presence of a non-sexual immature love relationship is a dominant characteristic of the films in which Jun starred. Unlike Hollywood romantic comedies, Jun's characters in the romantic comedies *My Sassy Girl* and *Windstruck* have no sexual relationship of any kind (i.e., kissing, sex). As the Korean film scholar, Soyoung Kim, correctly observes, *Windstruck* seems reluctant to engage Myung-Woo and Kyung-Jin (Jun), who are in their twenties, in a sexual way. Kim takes an example from a scene in which Myung-Woo tries to kiss Kyung-Jin (Jun's character) and Kyung-Jin stops him by putting a burning stick to his lips. Kim claims that this "inscrutable purity" makes it difficult to consider Jun's character realistic. Therefore, the reversed gender roles in both *My Sassy Girl* and *Windstruck* result in "much ado about nothing" between a "sassy" girl and her effeminate boyfriend, while not having much to do with a subversive meaning in gender politics in Korea.<sup>16</sup>

As Yu-Mi, a Korean college student who is interested in writing screenplays, observes, "come to think of it, her films have had no kiss scenes or anything like that...She doesn't even hold hands [with the male character] in *My Sassy Girl*. It's so unrealistic (laughs)." Carrie, a twenty-one-year old Korean-American, reiterated this view in responding to *My Sassy Girl*, "it's kind of like an odd love story, kind of makes you, like, attracted to it. I mean, to me that sounds like that would happen when you are in junior high."

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<sup>16</sup> Soyoung Kim, "A Critique of *Windstruck*," Cine 21, June 2004.

*White Valentine*, *Il Mare*, and *Daisy* are all examples of films that share this characteristic of a pure-hearted, virginal image of Jun. Jun Ji-Hyun's debut film, *White Valentine*, tells a story of an 18-year old girl, Jung-Min, and a twenty-something man, Hyun-Jin. Jun Ji-Hyun plays the role of Jung-Min, who has quit high school to teach herself painting. One day, a white pigeon flies into her window with a love letter on its foot. Without knowing whom the letter is to or from, the pure-hearted girl, Jung-Min, replies to the anonymous man. In fact, the letter is from Hyun-Jin, who writes messages to his dead girlfriend. Jung-Min and Hyun-Jin gradually fall in love while exchanging letters using the white pigeon. In this fairytale-like story, Jun's character draws paintings in a park, takes care of a lost puppy, and helps her grandfather run a small bookstore. Yet, these pure-hearted actions contrast with Jun-Min's feeling of sorrow resulting from the death of her parents when she was young. *White Valentine* shares characteristics with *My Sassy Girl* and *Windstruck*. In these films Jun's characters have had traumatic experiences in their lives and there is an absence of a sexual relationship.

*Il Mare*<sup>17</sup> is a time-travel narrative and reinforces the image of Jun as the innocent and lonely girl who has not recovered from her lost love. Jun's character, Eun-Joo, used to live in a house standing alone by the sea, which is called "Il Mare." When she moves out, she leaves a message in the mailbox for the next tenant, asking that her letters be forwarded to her new address because she is still waiting for a letter

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<sup>17</sup> *The Lake House* (dir. Alejandro Agresti, 2006), in which Sandra Bullock and Keanu Reeves starred, is a Hollywood remake of this Korean film, *Il Mare* (2000).

from her ex-boyfriend. Mysteriously, the message reaches Sung-Hyun, who lived in “Il Mare” two years ago. Eun-Joo and Sung-Hyun come to believe that there is a rupture in the fabric of time that allows them to communicate through the mailbox. The two continue to keep each other company through their letters and fall in love. Eun-Joo later discovers that Sung-Hyun died two years ago from a car accident inadvertently caused by her. She hurriedly puts her last letter in the mailbox, hoping that the letter will reach him before he leaves. The film ends with the scene in which Sung-Hyun visits Eun-Joo on the day of her moving into “Il Mare,” saying “I have a very long story to tell you” (Lee Hyun-Seung, 2000). Jun Ji-Hyun portrays a girl who is so pure-hearted that she cannot forget her ex-boyfriend even though he has betrayed her in this film. Once more, she finds love through adolescent-like act of exchanging letters and only expresses her love in a non-sexual way.

*Daisy* is another example that perpetuates Jun’s image as a pure-hearted girl. Set in Amsterdam, *Daisy* tells a story of a love triangle between three Koreans. Jun plays Hae-Young, who lives with her grandfather while helping him run an antiques store and although she is twenty-four years old she has never been in a romantic relationship. On weekends, she works as a street artist, painting portraits of tourists in a picturesque square. An anonymous admirer delivers daisies to her everyday. Being curious about who is sending daisies to her, she dreams of meeting the anonymous man someday. One day, she meets Jung-Woo, who asks her to paint his portrait. Jung-Woo is an Interpol officer who is investigating drug trafficking between Europe and Asia. Hae-Young falls for him mistakenly thinking that he is the

anonymous man. In fact, it is a contract killer, Park Eui, who has been watching her and sending daisies to her everyday. For him, Hae-Young represents a “pure soul” as opposed to his tainted soul. Yet, he only watches her from a distance. The tragedy develops as the police officer and the killer both fall in love with Jun’s character. Just like the previous films, Jun Ji-Hyun portrays a pure-hearted girl who is waiting for true love in *Daisy*. Her pure soul leads her to wait for the anonymous man whom she has never met. Even though she gets involved with two men who love her, the audience never sees her having a romantic or sexual relationship with a man.

The absence of parents or a family is another dominant characteristic of Jun’s films. Jun’s characters do not portray the image of a professional single woman who is independent of a patriarchal family order. Rather, Jun portrays a lonely girl (but not a social outcast as in the case with Chang Mi-Hee’s persona) who is waiting for true love. Jun’s characters in *White Valentine* and *Daisy* live with their grandfather and thus they are still protected and financially dependent. This character that Jun portrays either has a non-sexual adolescent-like relationship with men (in *White Valentine*, *Il Mare*, *My Sassy Girl*, *Windstruck*) or has had no previous romantic relationship with men (in *Daisy*).

Jun’s typical on-screen image is not associated with sexuality because she portrays a pure girl who can be seen as progressing towards the roles of wife and mother as the responses illustrated in the previous section. Despite the fact that the notion of the asexual mother/wife has been conventionalized in Korean and Asian cinema and that the primary audience for Jun’s films may be younger audiences, it

still seems significant that a young female character in romantic comedies and melodramas uniformly portrays a virgin as romantic and sexual relationships are central to these genres.

While referring to *Daisy*, Amy, a twenty-five-year old hairstylist in Kansas, wondered, “she (Jun Ji-Hyun) portrays a twenty-four or twenty-five year old girl, but she has never been in a relationship. Is that common in Korea to be twenty-four years old and, I mean...it’s just unrealistic. I think my mother would want me to be like her (laughs).” As Carrie said, “Jun Ji-Hyun is not portrayed as a sex object in films,” Helen, who is more familiar with Jun, explains, “she is a *virgin*, you know....I think her virginity has some sort of appeal to Korean men or Asian men....I can’t understand...why are Asian men so obsessed with virginity?”

When asked about this desexualized representation of Jun’s characters, the Korean young females in group four maintained that Jun’s virginal purity primarily appealed to male audiences in Korea and her films functioned to serve male fantasies. According to Tae-Hee, “[Jun’s] innocence, inexperience, and immaturity function to fulfill male fantasies. You know, all the Korean men want their girlfriends or wives to be virgins even when they are not virgins themselves.” Yu-Mi, who wants to become a screenwriter, added, “Mostly, all the writers and directors are men in Korea. So, it’s natural that the films reflect male fantasies.” Hyun-Su touched on the appeal of Jun’s sexual purity to Korean male audiences:

“Korean men have this obsession about their own women’s virginity. I believe Jun’s purity has a kind of symbolic meaning. Symbolically Jun needs to have that virginal purity so that the male audiences can keep fantasizing about her and maybe about their future wives, too.”

Sung-Ah, a twenty-three year old college student, even interpreted the effeminate representation of male characters in Jun's films as being in the service of male fantasies:

“Kyun-Woo and the male characters [in the films] are not so masculine, you know, [but rather are] emasculate and weak. That is also to serve male fantasies, I mean, the male audiences' fantasies. If the male characters are very masculine and sexually attractive, it would be difficult for the male audiences to fantasize about Jun as a pure, innocent girl. She should not have any sexual desires.”

Why, then, might Jun's characters' sexual purity be appealing to Korean/Asian audiences? I argue that the underlying fantasy appeal of Jun's virginal body is intrinsically connected to the discourses on female body inscribed by neo-Confucian traditions. As previously discussed in chapters three and four, neo-Confucianism (developed by Zhu Xi during the Song dynasty in China) is the term used to distinguish this belief system from the earlier form of Confucianism by Confucius and Mencius. It was during the Chosŏn dynasty (1392-1910) in Korea when neo-Confucianism was established as a state ideology and code of conduct for both men and women. South Korea has now entered a post-industrial consumer society and the social, economic status of women has generally improved. Nonetheless, the ideology of neo-Confucianism still plays an important role in the continuing control of women's bodies.

In order to understand the impact of neo-Confucianism on contemporary gender roles in Korean society, it is crucial to understand the concept of *qi*, a material force which flows through all things giving them form and vitality. Since *qi* exists in

everything, from the whole universe to the tiniest dust particle, “the many are ultimately One” and thus there is no distinction between the self and the universe.<sup>18</sup> Neo-Confucian texts are filled with innumerable directives to “lose the consciousness of the self and to enter a state of selflessness where the self becomes subsumed into the family, the community and, finally, the universe, thereby achieving the ultimate goal of sagehood.”<sup>19</sup> However, this ideal of selfless subjectivity applied only to men. Neo-Confucianism incorporated the discourse of *yin* and *yang*, which were paired complementary opposites whose interactions kept the world in balance. *Yin* is associated with the feminine, the passive, the negative, and the weak while *yang* is associated with the opposite qualities and forces (i.e., the masculine, the active, the positive, the strong). Neo-Confucian scholars created a hierarchical gender relation based on this “natural order” of things and situated *yang*, i.e., men, as the dominant and more important gender. While men were supposed to cultivate or better themselves through the mind (study of the Confucian classics) and body (maintenance of the family through ancestor worship), women, as an inferior gender, were occupied with maintaining and reproducing the family line through their corporeal bodies. The female body was a vessel through which the male line could be perpetuated. As a result, neo-Confucianism emphasized “the corporeal” for the female body, the very aspect men were encouraged to transcend. This tradition

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<sup>18</sup> W. Theodore DeBary et al., *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, Vol 1. (Columbia University Press, 1960), 457.

<sup>19</sup> Taeyon Kim provides the social and historical processes through which the notions of female body have been constructed in Korea in “Neo-Confucian Body Techniques: Women’s Bodies in Korea’s Consumer Society,” *Body and Society*, Vol. 9(2), 2003.



created the idea of women as bodies more than subjects, and reinforced the concept of women as primarily physical bodies.<sup>20</sup> Neo-Confucianism emphasized the ways to discipline and control women's bodies since these bodies were so valuable because of the potential capacity to bear children (particularly boys).

The neo-Confucian notion of the female body (with its emphasis on the corporeal) continues to be held in today's Korean society in general and in Jun Ji-Hyun's on-screen images in particular. Jun's body should be preserved physically pure for the sake of her potential for child bearing because she is regarded as progressing towards the roles of wife and mother. Unlike Hollywood romantic comedies (whose narratives center around female protagonists' search for "Mr. Right"), Jun's films focus on retarding the situation and/or the moment of finding a romantic partner, i.e., her "Mr. Right." The effeminate male characters in Jun's films function to delay the meeting of Jun with her romantic partner while simultaneously providing comical effects. As Sung-Ah in group four has pointed out, Jun's films do not allow Jun's characters to have any sexual desires towards the male characters. The fact that the audience never gets to see any sexual relationship between Jun's characters and the male characters serves to construct Jun's images as a pure/virginal body rather than a subject. It is significant that *My Sassy Girl*, which transformed Jun Ji-Hyun into one of the most popular icons in Asia, endows no name to Jun's character in the film. Jun Ji-Hyun is reduced to a body but this body is so valuable

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

and appealing because she represents a desirable wife-to-be or wife-in-progress from a standpoint of the long-standing neo-Confucian ideology.

However, this obsession with virginity is different from the ideology of female chastity and fidelity that underlies the star images of Choi Eun-Hee in the service of traditional family values (e.g., Confucian patriarchy) and masculine nationalist discourses (e.g., anti-colonial Korean nationalism, modernization and industrialization projects).<sup>21</sup> As discussed in the previous chapter, the current social order in Korea, based on capitalist patriarchy and the nuclear family, reifies the idea that the female is subordinated under an individual male's control as his personal property. Yet, at the same time, the ideology of neo-Confucianism continues to operate and reinforce female stereotypes in Korean cinema. As the responses of the interviewees demonstrate, Jun Ji-Hyun embodies an ideal girlfriend type or a wife-to-be, not a chaste female type from a traditional view. The neo-Confucian ideal of the corporeal for the female body has been transformed into discourses on virginity while reflecting a situation (e.g., women's position, status) in which women became men's personal property and under individual male's control.

The interviewees in groups three and four thought that the representation of Jun's virginal purity is not only related to male fantasies but to men's possessive desires as well. Tae-Hee in group four put it this way:

“There exists a double standard. The men should be very experienced and good at sex, but the women should not. I think that [the double standard]

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<sup>21</sup> I have analyzed the images of two Korean female film stars from previous eras, Choi Eun-Hee and Chang Mi-Hee, as being in the service of traditional patriarchal values and masculine nationalist discourses in chapters three and four.

reflects [Korean] men's possessive desires {soyuyongmang}. A man has to possess his woman, like you are mine, you belong to me. If another man has already had a sexual relationship with the woman, she is treated like a used, defiled one...like trash."

Hyun-Su in the same group concurred, "She should keep her virginity and remain as a pure girl because it is undecided whose property or possession she will become." The interviewees in group three (Korean-American young females) also discussed Jun's character in relation to men's possessive desires and obsession with virginity by using the following words, "own," "possess," and "belong." These responses demonstrate that the interviewees believed the female has now become the individual male's property, rather than being used to support a larger patriarchal system or male-dominant nationalist ideologies.

### **The Impossibility of the Female Gaze and the Commodification of the Male Gaze**

The idea of female subordination under an individual male's control is realized in film on another correlated level: the mechanisms of looking. I argue that the gender relation within capitalist patriarchy facilitates and legitimizes the male gaze that objectifies the female for the benefit of masculine visual pleasure. As previously discussed in chapter four, Chang Mi-Hee's films repeatedly utilize the voyeuristic and un-reciprocal male gaze in their narratives. Likewise, the on-screen images of Jun Ji-Hyun are consistently presented through the point-of-view of male characters in her films. The films' narratives attribute to-be-looked-at-ness to Jun's characters through a male character's voice-over narration or a voyeuristic male gaze.

However, while the male gaze in Chang's films is related to the techniques of discipline and punishment which were prevalent under the military rule, the male gaze in Jun's films reveals the workings of male-centered narratives which perpetuate Jun's innocence. I focus on three films (*Il Mare*, *My Sassy Girl*, *Daisy*) to illustrate how the male gaze is used to construct Jun's persona as a pure girl.

As described above, there is a two-year gap between Eun-Joo (Jun) and Sung-Hyun's timelines in *Il Mare*. At one point, Eun-Joo tells Sung-Hyun that she regularly waited for the subway two years ago at a particular bench at the end of the platform. Sung-Hyun goes to the subway platform, and observes her, but she cannot recognize him because, from her point of view, they have not yet met. Therefore, Sung-Hyun can look at her but not vice versa. This dynamic is repeated in the scene where Sung-Hyun is hit by a car and dies in the street on the way to stop Eun-Joo's boyfriend from leaving her. Eun-Joo sees him dying but she cannot recognize him. The narrative does not afford her the agency to identify him. Furthermore, in the last scene in which Eun-Joo and Sung-Hyun actually meet for the first time, she has no idea who he is or what he is going to tell her. On the contrary, Sung-Hyun knows all about the letter exchanging, her ex-boyfriend, the car accident, and the fact that she loves him as well. Throughout the film, the audience hears voice-over narration from both Sung-Hyun and Eun-Joo. Yet, only Sung-Hyun can gaze upon Eun-Joo. Moreover, Sung-Hyun's last line, "I have a very long story to tell you," confers him the status of the storyteller of their relationship. In this sense, Eun-Joo not only lacks a gaze but also takes up the position as a passive listener of her own love story.

The male protagonist plays a more blatant role of storyteller in *My Sassy Girl* from the beginning of the film. The audience experiences the sassiness and hidden vulnerability of Jun's character as Kyun-Woo tells the story of their relationship through first-person narration. Moreover, *My Sassy Girl* situates the male as a bearer of gaze and the female as the object of the gaze. For instance, while holding Jun's drunken character in his arms, Kyun-Woo puts medicine in her mouth to wake her up, and wipes her mouth. Then, the camera pans to the left, and frames her body (e.g., her closed eyes, nose, lips, neck, and then breasts under her pink shirt) in close up. This shot functions as Kyun-Woo's point-of-view shot. He thinks that she is his ideal type when she is asleep, thus passive and tame. Furthermore, when Kyun-Woo showers in the motel while Jun's character sleeps, the audience can see the rear side of his naked body through a transparent glass door. However, the male body is not presented romantically through a female point-of-view because the female character (Jun's character) is "literally" asleep. Therefore, the film reproduces the convention of male gaze, which the female character is unable to reciprocate.<sup>22</sup>

The lack of female gaze functions to compromise the seemingly reversed gender roles in the film's narrative. However weak and submissive he may be, Kyun-Woo himself tells the audience about his unusual effeminate personality in juxtaposition to the quirkiness of his girlfriend. By contrast, Jun's character is subject to being constantly observed and evaluated from the point-of-view of the male character, Kyun-Woo. Moreover, as discussed above, the vulnerability of the male

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<sup>22</sup> Sung Baek-Yup, 18.

(i.e., his naked body) is unmediated by a female gaze. Yet, Jun's character is easily positioned as an object while being looked at by the male character, Kyun-Woo. This conventional storytelling from a male point-of-view signifies the seemingly strong and new female character type is dependent upon the acknowledgement and acceptance of the male.

The male gaze in *Daisy* reveals more openly the voyeuristic desire of the male protagonist than the two films discussed above (i.e., *Il Mare* and *My Sassy Girl*). Ever since the killer, Park Eui, happened to see Hae-Young (Jun) painting daisies in the countryside, he has fallen in love with her and sent her daisies everyday. He gets an apartment which looks down on the square where Hae-Young paints portraits for tourists. He observes her through a telephoto lens while fantasizing about her purity. However, when the detective Jung-Woo enters into the frame, Park Eui's fantasy is interrupted. Park Eui senses that Jung-Woo is not a tourist and points a gun at him. While Jung-Woo uses Hae-Young in order to disguise himself as a tourist whose portrait is being painted, Hae-Young mistakes him as the anonymous man for whom she has been waiting. The film's narrative is told through the voice-over narration of these three characters, but Hae-Young is the only person who does not know the truth. Jung-Woo knows that he is not Hae-Young's anonymous man. Yet, he pretends to be the man in order to keep using her for his investigation. Hae-Young's misperception results from her inability to reciprocate the gaze from the anonymous man. Later in the film, she even loses her voice after being wounded in the throat during a gun battle in the square. Lacking both gaze and voice, she does nothing but

wait for Jung-Woo, who has been transferred from Amsterdam to Korea. Park Eui takes care of the sorrow-stricken Hae-Young as a friend. At the narrative's conclusion, when Hae-Young discovers that it is Park Eui who has sent daisies to her, she is shot and killed in the square while trying to tell him that she "knows." In other words, as soon as she becomes able to return the gaze, she is killed off.

Jun's characters' failure to return the male gaze functions to perpetuate the image of Jun Ji-Hyun as a pure girl. Jun's characters remain pure and innocent as long as the male characters maintain a safe distance that allows them to enjoy voyeuristic pleasure. Linda Williams in her article, *When the Woman Looks*, points to the fact that many of the "good girl" heroines of American silent films were often figuratively, or literally, blind. She claims that blindness allows the male protagonist to look at the female "with no danger that she will return that look and in so doing express desires of her own."<sup>23</sup> Williams' argument holds true in the above three films as well in the sense that Jun's characters are figuratively blind, thus able to portray the pure "good girl" image. Although Eun-Joo comes across Sung-Hyun several times in *Il Mare*, she cannot "see" him. In *My Sassy Girl*, Jun's character turns Kyun-Woo's ideal type only when she is asleep with her eyes closed. It is no surprise, then, that Hae-Young is killed off in *Daisy* when she finally can "see" whom her true love is. If "to see is to desire," as Williams argues,<sup>24</sup> Hae-Young needs to die

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<sup>23</sup> Linda Williams, "When the Woman Looks," in Mary Ann Doane, et al. eds., *Revision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism* (American Film Institute, 1984), 83.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

before she expresses any desires so that she remains a pure soul to the male protagonist and to the audience.

Most of the interviewees believed that the narratives of Jun's films served to fulfill male fantasies and unfolded through the point-of-view of the male characters. The Korean-American young females in group three discussed the representation and objectification of Jun's characters in films. According to Helen, who was from a Korean family and was fluent in Korean:

"They (Jun's films) are always from a male point-of-view, I guess... Like *My Sassy Girl*, it's like, "my"<sup>25</sup> sassy girl. It's about Jun Ji-Hyun seen through the eyes of a guy. And... the Korean title of *Windstruck* is, like, "let me" introduce my girlfriend, you know. And it (*Windstruck*) starts with the narration by Jang Hyuk (the actor who played the male protagonist) when they first meet. So, like, we don't get to see the story from Jun Ji-Hyun's point-of-view."

In response to *Daisy*, Jennifer, a twenty-year-old Korean-American student, expressed her view as follows:

"It's kind of like a male fantasy.... where someone random, I mean as long as you aren't afraid... that someone is "stalking" you, you know, someone sending you flowers, you know, I think that's more like adolescent male fantasy. It's still male fantasy, though. It has objectification of some sort."

Carrie, a twenty-one-year old Korean-American research assistant, suggested the influence of Western culture as one possible reason for the adoption of the male gaze and female objectification in Korean cinema:

"Is that our Western philosophy or Western culture going over there, and sort of pressing against whatever Asian culture has.... In our western culture, it's always, like girls always want to be pursued and you cannot think about guys

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<sup>25</sup> The use of quotation marks here indicates the respondent's use of their fingers to make virtual quotation marks while speaking.



being pursued as much, so commercially it's always the guy that goes after and gets the girl."

Elaine concurred:

"In our society, it's kind of like that, I guess. It's usually the male who protects the woman, I guess. In *Daisy*, he (Park Eui) protects, like in other sense, he's like watching or watching over her (Jun's character)...In most societies...it's usually the guy who protects the family or the guy who provides things for the family and maybe that's one of the reasons why we see, uh, like that, male point-of-view and maybe, uh, objectification of women."

These responses by Korean-American young females have a resemblance to the responses of Korean-American middle-aged women in group one in that the members of both groups viewed the adoption of the male gaze in Korean cinema (e.g., Chang's and Jun's films) as a result of Western cultural influence. However, the Korean-American young females in group three tended to accept the voyeuristic male gaze as "normal" and even "sweet." Helen, Kate, Jennifer, and Elaine spoke about their romantic view of this male gaze:

**Helen:** You know, that secret admirer thing, I think that's kind of sweet, though. Like... he is a stalker...but I think, like, I wouldn't mind if someone sends me flowers everyday, you know, I like that kind of stuff because I am a girl, you know. I like old-school stuff.

**Kate:** Yeah, I think there's that response that, like, you know, I must be special to someone. I think that...becoming the object of affection is a pretty normal thing, and I think.....if you were to receive gifts of that nature without feeling threatened, I think it's a flattering thing.

**Interviewer:** (to the group) What do you think? Do you agree?

**Jennifer:** Yeah, I would be flattered.

**Elaine:** I was a little creeped out. I don't think I want somebody to watch me. If you think about it in sort of realistic terms, it's kind of creepy. But, there's some appeal to that, I guess. It's put into our brain that the guy should go after the girl.

By contrast, the Korean young females in group four offered a very different (i.e. critical) view of the voyeuristic male gaze in Jun's films. They criticized the male gaze because it was derived from a "pure male fantasy" and functioned to encourage a "misleading myth about women." Hyun-Su said:

"They are all the stories about male fantasies. We have fantasies about men, too (laughs). But (Jun's films) don't reflect our fantasies, or our thoughts. *My Sassy Girl*, and *Windstruck* are the stories about Cha Tae-Hyun (the actor's name in *My Sassy Girl*) and Jang Hyuk (the actor's name in *Windstruck*) in the end. Men looking at one weird girl, falling in love with her...it's just a *pure* male fantasy. These films are just lighthearted comedies depicted from the male perspective, objectifying Jun's pretty, innocent body from time to time."

Yu-Mi, an aspiring screenwriter, expressed her critical view as well:

"Come to think of it, *Daisy* is a story about stalking. Jun's character is basically stalked by a killer. Stalking is a serious problem against women. But the narrative itself is kind of sugarcoating it as a romantic gesture. A pure girl being watched over by some *mysterious, romantic* guy."

Bo-Yoen viewed the stalking situation in a more realistic term:

"Practically, he is a stalker. How creepy is that to think it really happens in my life? Men must be thinking that we are lonely, always missing somebody, waiting for someone, or always want to be watched and loved by a mysterious man. I would never want that. It's just scary."

Yu-Mi added a following comment with discontent, "I am *sick and tired* of those Korean films. They are creating a wrong, misleading myth about women."

The definitions of romance and love are influenced by factors such as cultural identity and life situation. The Korean-American young females who grew up in the United States tended to believe it was socially acceptable for men to pursue and objectify the female. They seem to have naturalized the gendered structure of feeling within capitalist patriarchy in which a male associates the feeling of love with the

sense of control and possession, and a female accepts dependence and obedience as the expression of her love and devotion.<sup>26</sup>

The Korean young females, on the other hand, were very critical of (and in some instances offended by) the male gaze and the conventional masculine narratives that objectified the female. They were especially critical of the lack of female agency that the male gaze and the masculine narrative facilitated. Jung-Mi said, “Jun doesn’t even have a name [in *My Sassy Girl*]. ‘She’<sup>27</sup> is just one of those weird, abnormal girls rather than one specific person or individual. [Jun’s character is] an abnormal, tomboy-like girl who will be tamed by a guy after all.” Sung-Ah echoed this sentiment, saying “Especially, *My Sassy Girl* is like one funny story that has happened to a guy, or that might happen to any guys, rather than the story about a girl who is trying to find her identity.”

The Korean young females’ critique of the male gaze focused on the tendency of commercialism to sell certain ideas or products by objectifying a female body in Korean popular culture. These Korean girls, who were more familiar with Jun’s off-screen images than the Korean-American girls in group three, discussed how Jun Ji-Hyun’s body became an object through commercial strategies not only for the male but for the female as well:

**Jung-Mi:** I think she has a dualistic image. She portrays a very innocent girl in films, but if you look at her TV commercials, she has a lot of sex appeal...I think the two opposing images are [created by] commercial strategies. Sex sells. Everybody knows that. But then, virginity sells *even better*. So, she

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<sup>26</sup> Cho Hae-Joang, *Hangukŭi Yŏsŏnggwha Namsŏng*, 124-125.

<sup>27</sup> ‘She’ is the name of Jun’s character in *My Sassy Girl*.

created the feeling of being unapproachable or untouchable, like, you cannot have her, or you cannot touch her, but you can only see her.

**Hyun-Su:** Her commercials just focus on her waist, abs, or thighs with close-ups. [They are] very sensual.

**Sung-Ah:** I don't think that objectification is only meant for men. It's the women who purchase the products after all, like cosmetics, hair products, and clothes. I think the commercials are sending the message, 'if you use this product, you can become pretty like Jun Ji-Hyun. So, buy it now.' So, I think the gaze [in commercials] is structured to appeal more to women than to men.

Jun Ji-Hyun has proven her star power in both television commercials and films in Korea. She rose to stardom through a famous commercial for Samsung printers in 1999, in which she exhibited youthful energy with a sexy dance. Unlike previous commercials, which focused on actors' faces or products with static close-up shots, the commercials that employ Jun feature her expressing her youthful vibrancy through dynamic movements such as running, dancing, crying, or shouting. After the huge success of *My Sassy Girl*, Jun was featured in many commercials, which repeatedly reversed female gender types. She, indeed, embodies a wild, quirky, and often material girl in these commercials. Moreover, many of the commercials focus on Jun's body portraying her as a sexy vixen rather than a pure-hearted girl. These different, if not subversive, female characters marked a departure from the clichéd images of the submissive good girl in commercials.<sup>28</sup>

The responses by the Korean young females in group four reveal that they think commercialism and capitalism accelerated both the commodification of stars and the male gaze in contemporary Korean society. Sung-Ah, who reported that she was taking a Women's Studies course, expressed an interesting view that commercial

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<sup>28</sup> Baek Eun-Ha, "Three Reports on Jun Ji-Hyun [1] & [2]," *Cine 21*, June 2003.

strategies used the male gaze to appeal to the same sex (female audiences/consumers) in advertisement media. Furthermore, she drew comparisons between Jun's image and Britney Spears, and discussed the dissemination of American consumerist values and ideologies through the popular media.

"I think Jun Ji-Hyun's image and its promotional strategies can be compared to Britney Spears....The image of a girl who is innocent but at the same time sexy...I don't think Jun Ji-Hyun is a good role model for girls. But the [Korean popular] media keep sending messages like 'you are supposed to be like Jun. You have to become like her.' So, sometimes, *even I* get to think that 'oh, maybe, I should try to be like her.' The same goes to Britney Spears. She is not a role model for American girls, but the commercial, consumerist media repeatedly promoted that specific image and the girls seem to accept that image and imitate her. I think we are sort of brainwashed or indoctrinated by consumerist images and ideas."

Bo-Yeon in group four reiterated Sung-Ah's point:

"I think Korean popular culture, its consumerist culture is getting closer to American consumerist culture. I think Korean culture commodifies women even more than American culture these days. It's like 'blue comes from indigo, but is bluer' {ch'öng ch'ul öram ch'öng öram}.<sup>29</sup> The ways women are treated in today's popular culture promote the idea that it is natural for women to use their bodies or looks and to objectify their own bodies, and it is a smart thing to manipulate your image and commodify your sexuality."

These responses highlight a situation in which American consumerist culture and values are imported along with American popular culture products and become dominant in Korean popular culture. Thus, the historical processes of Westernization and Americanization collude with the ideologies of capitalist patriarchy and consumerism thereby reinforcing the male gaze in Korean society. The respondents in both groups noted this cultural influence, however, the Korean-American young

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<sup>29</sup> This is a saying commonly used in Korea which means "the pupil excels his master."

females regarded the gendered structure of looking (i.e., the male as a bearer of the gaze and the female as image or spectacle) as socially acceptable. By contrast, the Korean girls offered critical views of the controlling male gaze and the influence of American culture.

I argue that cultural imperialism's emphasis on asymmetrical transnational cultural flows illuminates the discrepancy in the interviewees' reactions to the male gaze. The cultural exchange between the United States and Korea has been predominantly unidirectional, that is, from the United States to Korea. As a result, the relationships between the US and Korea in modern Korean history have formulated the following scheme: the US as the producer/sender of cultural products and values and Korea as the receiver of such products and values. The Korean young females were more keenly aware of this foreign cultural influence and focused on its potentially damaging effects on Korean indigenous culture because they viewed this exchange from the recipient's point-of-view. The Korean-American young females considered the male gaze neither harmful to the female nor to Korean culture and instead, regarded it as socially acceptable because they belong to the producer/sender culture (note: the use of a word, "our" in Carrie's and Elaine's responses in reference to Western culture or society).

### **Jun's Transnational Stardom in Asia: Re-Centering Globalization**

Unlike most of previous stars in Korea including Choi Eun-Hee and Chang Mi-Hee, Jun Ji-Hyun's stardom is a product of pre-planned star management. A Korean talent agency, SidusHQ (then EBM), selected Jun Ji-Hyun as a potential star when she was fifteen years old and trained her according to its carefully designed strategies for star making.<sup>30</sup> As mentioned earlier, the commercial success of *My Sassy Girl* transformed its star, Jun Ji-Hyun, into one of the most recognizable and profitable icons throughout Asia, especially among Asian youth. After *My Sassy Girl*, Jun's talent agency quickly embarked on a new project in an attempt for bigger commercial success in Asia. *Windstruck* was designed to appeal to Asian countries and the film was considered "Asia Project #1." Bill Kong, who had produced *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) and *Hero* (2002), took charge of the film's financing and overseas distribution. The film was released simultaneously in Korea and Hong Kong in June 2004.<sup>31</sup> While the film was unsuccessful both commercially and critically in Korea, *Windstruck* was very well received in Hong Kong, China, and Japan. Even though it was often derided as "a two-hour long Jun Ji-Hyun commercial" in Korea, it held an appeal to the fans of Jun Ji-Hyun in Asian countries.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Moon Suk, "Three Reports on Jun Ji-Hyun [3]," *Cine 21*, June 2003.

<sup>31</sup> Park Eun-Young, *Cine 21*.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

“Asia Project #2,” which utilized Jun’s iconic star status, was *Daisy*. The film was a co-production by Hong Kong and Korean film companies, in which multi-national casts and crew members participated.<sup>33</sup> Despite the fact that *Daisy* again received a mediocre reception both at the box-office and by critics in Korea, it succeeded in attracting a good number of audiences in Asia. In these star vehicles, Jun’s star images have been constructed and exploited by the business-minded management and marketing skills. Furthermore, they are more likely to appeal to her overseas fans in Asia rather than domestic fans in Korea. As Yu-Mi in group four puts it, “She (Jun) repeats the *same* image, the *same* role *over and over again*. I’m kind of sick and tired of that repeated image, that pure, immature girl image. Her agents and she should realize that it is time to change her image, try different roles and *hair styles* (laughs).” Jung-Mi added her opinion about Jun’s transnational stardom with some sarcasm:

“She has a problem with pronunciation (in Korean), so she speaks like a baby. I don’t understand why.....Korean films keep featuring her. Her films failed (at the box office) except for *My Sassy Girl*. I think she is better off abroad because of her pronunciation (laughs). Her voice, her speech should be subtitled.”

After Jun became a bankable star in Asian countries, she not only starred in films that were designed to sell her star images in these countries but numerous TV commercials continue to exploit her star images in the region as well. In the early 1990s, Hollywood’s domination of the Asian film/media market began to diminish,

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<sup>33</sup> *Daisy* is directed by a Hong Kong director, Andrew Lau Wai Keung, who is most famous for the *Infernal Affairs* trilogy. *Infernal Affairs* (2002) is adapted into a Hollywood film, *The Departed* (2006), which is directed by Martin Scorsese, and stars Leonardo DiCaprio, Jack Nicholson, and Matt Damon.



while Hong Kong martial arts films, and Japanese films and TV shows gained popularity in Asian countries. Since the late 1990s, however, South Korea seems to have become a new center, replacing the cultural hegemony of Hong Kong and Japan in Asia. Throughout South East and East Asia, Korean popular culture seems to be a new global force. It not only sells its own products (e.g., films, TV shows and CDs) but also sells the Korean ways of life (e.g., fashion, food and cultural values).<sup>34</sup> Jun Ji-Hyun's transnational stardom coincides with this changing hegemony in the Asian cultural scene. Moon Hye-Joo, the director of the overseas marketing team in "Cinema Service," (one of the major film distribution companies in Korea) analyzes Jun's transnational stardom in Asia as follows: "These days, the images of South Korea among Asian people in the region center around its consumerism, sensitivity to fashion, and its role as a leader of cultural trends. Jun Ji-Hyun seems to represent these dynamic images of South Korean culture."<sup>35</sup>

When talking about Jun's transnational stardom, the Korean-American young females in group three focused on her physical traits. These responses include: "She is very pretty. [She is a] typical Asian woman that I imagine. She does have a really nice hair. Her skin is flawless" (Helen); "She is very pretty... pure, you know, like an innocent Asian girl" (Kate). Throughout the interview process, the Korean-American young females tended to express stereotypical views of Asian women while describing Jun's images or characters using such words as "innocent,"

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<sup>34</sup> Kim Hyun-Mi, 260-261.

<sup>35</sup> Moon Suk, Cine 21.

“reserved,” and “soft.” They often times utilized the term, “Asian” in reference to Jun Ji-Hyun whereas the Korean young females in group one always referred to her as “Korean.” This indicates that Jun’s racial or ethnic identity is more prominent to Korean-Americans rather than her nationality.

The Korean girls in group four discussed the duality of Jun’s images as the primary reason for her transnational stardom. For instance, Hyun-Su described Jun Ji-Hyun, saying, “She has different images at the same time. From her neck up, I mean, her face is like a face of baby’s and is kind of oriental {tongyangjök}. Yet, her body is very thin, lean, long, sexy, and westernized.” Tae-Hee had a similar comment to Hyun-Su’s and said, “She does have a *strange* appeal because of her dualistic image. I don’t think she is pretty according to our traditional beauty standard but she looks oriental and simultaneously very western. I think her dualistic image appeals to her fans in Asia.” These responses echo what Taeyon Kim observes in her article, *Neo-Confucian Body Techniques: Women’s Bodies in Korean’s Consumer Society*, in the tendencies in Korean women’s magazines and journals in the last decade or so:

“A casual browser of Korean women’s magazines might observe that many of the models or settings in the advertisements are Euro-American or look Euro-American. This image has become ever more pervasive. In June 1994, changes in laws allowed the Korean advertising industry to use foreign models and celebrities...which quickly led to a sharp increase in the use of foreign models to sell domestic wares...[N]ow even domestic products were marketed to Koreans by the likes of Cindy Crawford, Meg Ryan and Claudia Schiffer. While there does seem to have been a gradual increase in recent years of Korean models in domestic advertisements, these Korean models nearly all have features that have already been reconstructed to meet the prevailing standards of beauty which, if not totally white, are at least a

melding of Asian and Western features, the ideal encapsulated by the increasingly popular ‘Eurasian’ look.”<sup>36</sup>

In this sense, Jun’s dualistic image (her long straight hair and her face’s oriental or Asian appearance combined with Western features such as a tall and thin body structure) makes her ideal for the changing standard of beauty in the context of intensified consumer culture in Korea. The idea of Jun as a Eurasian beauty also resonates with an ideal articulated in the concept of cultural proximity in its hybridized form of cultures in contemporary Asia in an era of globalization. The Japanese media scholar, Iwabuchi Koichi, discusses the reason for and implications of the Japanese Wave during the mid 1990s as follows:

“[u]nder the globalizing forces, cultural similarities and resonances in the region are newly articulated....For audiences in Asia, Japanese popular culture represents cultural similarities and a common experience of modernity in the region that is based on an ongoing negotiation between the West and the non-West experiences that American culture cannot represent.”<sup>37</sup>

While signifying the creation of a regional cultural manifestation against the long-term domination of American culture, the rise of Japanese popular culture in Asia can be understood as resulting from its ability to reassert Asian identity and/or sensibilities with which local fans in Asia could easily identify. Likewise, the popular appeal of Jun and the Korean Wave may represent a shared experience of capitalist modernity among Asian countries. Unlike Hollywood stars that are culturally and geographically remote, Jun Ji-Hyun embodies an accessible star whose

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<sup>36</sup> Taeyon Kim, 103.

<sup>37</sup> Iwabuchi Koichi, “From Western Gaze to Global Gaze: Japanese Cultural Presence in Asia,” in Diane Crane et.al. eds., *Global Culture: Media, Arts, Policy, and Globalization*, (Routledge, 2002), 270.

images function to articulate common cultural experiences in Asia (e.g., a melding of Western and non-Western cultures) within the current globalization process.

However, the notion of cultural commonality alone cannot sufficiently address the issues of why the culture of specific nations' is preferred over others, what role the historical and local context plays in formulating such a phenomenon, and what role a particular star plays in the shared experience of transnational modernity. I will further discuss what Jun Ji-Hyun's star images and her stardom signify in the context of the early 2000s across Asian countries in the following section.

### **Jun's Consuming Body or Consuming Jun's Body:**

#### **The Formation of Pan-Asian Citizenship**

Statistics have shown that if a specific product employs Jun in its commercial, the sales of that product will increase by a large percentage. Thus, the phrase, the "Jun Ji-Hyun effect," came to be known in the world of TV commercials.<sup>38</sup> TV viewers are familiar with Jun's images not only in Korea but in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Japan as well through commercials for soft drinks, hair products, cosmetics, cameras, cell phones, and so on. There have been so many products which Jun Ji-Hyun represents that a short comic story called "Jun Ji-Hyun's day," in which Jun uses those products all day long, was quite popular on the Internet.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Park Mun-Ki, *Starwa CF* (Doonam, 2006), 100.

<sup>39</sup> Moon Suk, *Cine 21*.

Yu-Mi in group four pointed to a situation where Jun's body emerged as a channel that carried commercial concepts. According to Yu-Mi, "(Jun's) *namelessness* in *My Sassy Girl* might have helped her status as a commercial film star because she is not a specific individual but she and her body exist in order to *display* certain concepts or commercial products." Bo-Yeon also expressed her view of the impact of capitalist consumerism on contemporary Korean society:

"You know, they say that 'the advertisement is the flower of capitalism' {Kwanggonŭn Chabonjuŭiŭi Kkotsida}.<sup>40</sup> We are always consuming images without realizing it. It's like breathing in air all the time. I've never thought Jun Ji-Hyun is pretty, but the overflowing images in films and television kind of force me to think that 'oh, that virgin vamp image must be representing a positive female sexuality. I should be like Jun in order to be loved by men.' It bothers me to think that we are indoctrinated by commercialism or consumerism, but it is true."

These Korean girls' understanding of Jun's body as a channel or carrier of consumerist ideas, along with the prominence and pervasiveness of images in contemporary popular culture, concurs with Bryan S. Turner's discussion about the transformation of a desiring body under capitalism, especially in late capitalist society. Turner maintains that socio-economic changes have brought about fundamental shifts in the understanding of the female body from a "reproductive body" in traditional, pre-industrial society, to a "labouring body" in the industrial period, and finally to a "consuming body" in the post-industrial stage.<sup>41</sup> Jun Ji-Hyun's body indeed encapsulates the notion of the consuming body with the advent of intensified consumerist culture in Korea and Asia where women became more

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<sup>40</sup> This is a Korean phrase which means "advertisement represents the essence of capitalism."

<sup>41</sup> Bryan Turner, 3-5

important as consumers than mothers or laborers shifting the utility of their bodies from re/production to consumption.

The understanding of Jun's body in relation to contemporary consumer culture also illuminates the implications of the rise of Hallyu or the Korean Wave.

Myungkoo Kang, a Korean media scholar, provides a trajectory of the formulation of consumer society in Asian countries by writing about the formative process of East Asian Media and Cultural Studies. According to Kang, South Korea and Taiwan became consumer societies in the 1980s. Most Asian countries entered into highly consumer-based societies in the 1990s, thanks to the revival of the Asian economy, which included not only South Korea and Taiwan but also Singapore, Thailand, and Malaysia. In this process, youth in Asia emerged as a class that leads the consumer economy and new urban popular culture scenes.<sup>42</sup> While the youth population (including urban youth in mainland China) indulges the desires created by urban spaces, postmodern and post-industrial consumerism, which consumes symbols embedded in goods, was established in Asian countries.

The Korean Wave in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and South East Asian countries coincides with the emergence of youth consumer culture in these societies. This cultural phenomenon has been accelerated by the increased size of the middle class; as a result a wide range of consumers entered into the realm of mass consumer culture. In the case of Japan, whose industrialization process is ahead of other Asian

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<sup>42</sup> Myungkoo Kang, East Asian Modernities and the Formation of Media and Cultural Studies, in John Downing et al. eds., *The Sage Handbook of Media Studies* (Sage Publications Inc., 2004), 271-288.

countries, it is often argued that the Korean Wave in Japan results from Japanese consumers' nostalgia for the vibrant energy or social vigor, which Japan has allegedly lost. The majority of Japanese fans of Korean cultural products (e.g., films, television dramas) consist of the middle class (particularly middle-aged women).<sup>43</sup> Immersed in materialism and individualism, the urban youth and/or the affluent middle class across Asia appropriate Korean popular culture products (symbols or images embedded in Korean popular culture) as a way of self-expression while developing a sense of belonging in a fragmented postmodern society.

Whatever Jun's star images signify, whether it's her "sassy" girl image, her virginity, her image as a typical innocent Asian girl, her Eurasian look, South Korea's vibrant urban culture, or sensitivity to fashion and cultural trends, her body as a commodity-sign functions to drive postmodern consumption practices in the current post-industrial stage. In other words, marked as a (Eurasian) body of gender instability, virginity, typical Asian beauty, or South Korea's cultural vibrancy through her films and commercials, the consumption of Jun's sign-value (embedded in various endorsed products) serves as a means for the acquisition of her sign-value.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, Jun's consuming body or consuming her body (i.e., her sign-value) becomes a manifestation of changing social values and a formation of pan-Asian

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<sup>43</sup> Kim Hyun-Mi, 252-253.

<sup>44</sup> I draw on the notion of sign-value in postmodern consumption practices from Arthur W. Frank, *For a Sociology of the Body: An Analytical Review*, in Mike Featherstone and Bryan Turner, eds., *The Body: Social Process and Cultural Theory* (Sage Publications, 1991), 36-102.

citizenship among the youth and the middle-class in the region in an era of globalization.

The star images of Jun Ji-Hyun embody an ideal girlfriend who is “good to hang out with” (Kate), who is “having a good time” (Elaine) and who may not be “suitable for a wife, but perfect to have fun with” (Tae-Hee) as the respondents have observed. Although Jun’s characters in her films hide deep sorrow emanating from traumatic experiences, this is only to perpetuate Jun’s image as a pure-hearted girl while justifying her characters’ wacky actions (by contrast, the traumatic experiences in Chang Mi-Hee’s films lead her characters to dedicate their body to console tired Korean men). Formulated through lighthearted romantic comedies or conventional melodramas as well as television commercials, Jun’s star persona seems free from the imperatives of Cold War ideology, anti-colonial nationalism, or the national struggle to rebuild modern South Korea and redefine its legitimate membership; all factors that contributed to the construction of Choi Eun-Hee and Chang Mi-Hee’s star images. Liberated from the past master narratives of nation building, Jun’s stardom marks a new era of cultural expression and mobile citizenry within Western consumerism and under globalizing forces.

Yet, the legacy of old ideology (e.g., neo-Confucianism) still lingers in Jun’s star images. As discussed above, neo-Confucianism’s emphasis on the corporeal body for the female builds on capitalist patriarchy (thus resulting in the voyeuristic, un-reciprocal male gaze upon Jun’s virginal body), which in turn builds on consumerism and postmodern consumption practices. This commodified male gaze



upon Jun's body, however, is not limited to the objectification of the female for the benefit of masculine visual pleasure. With neo-Confucian body techniques still operating, Jun is primarily constructed as a body rather than a subject, and this body is used to carry certain ideas or commercial values not only to the male but also to the female audiences/consumers across Asia with the advent of highly commercialized late-capitalist societies in the region. Therefore, through these processes of re-writing and over-writing, Jun's star persona becomes a palimpsest of multiple layers of pre-modern neo-Confucian ideology and later-imported capitalist patriarchy, which are superimposed on Western consumerism and cultural regionalization under global capitalism.

## **VI. Conclusion**

For all the critical discussions about the representation of women and female spectators, film scholarship has paid little attention to the women's images and female audiences outside of the Hollywood or European context. Moreover, I have noted that feminist film criticism in Korea often applies Anglo-American feminist approaches to the discussions of female representation and female spectatorship in Korean cinema. In an effort to examine the specificity of Korean cinema's construction of femininity and the complexity of Korean female spectatorship, this dissertation has focused on the discourses around the images of three Korean female film stars from different time periods.

The theoretical concerns of this dissertation began by reflecting on my own subject positions in relation to Western theories, colonial and post-colonial discourses, and Korean Studies scholarship. Growing up in South Korea under the enormous influence of US cultural hegemony, I have been immersed in American popular cultural products and consumer products. Moreover, as a person who grew up in the metropolitan city of Seoul in a relatively affluent environment, I am one of the beneficiaries of such urban-centered processes as modernization and globalization. The rigid ideological division between the West (i.e., the modern, developed, affluent First World) and the non-West (e.g., the Third World existing before and outside the West) within Western theoretical thinking and colonial discourses does not reflect my complex subject positions which are constructed

within an already Westernized context. Thus, in this dissertation, I question essentializing ideas of the Western self in juxtaposition with non-Western Others while emphasizing instead the dialectic between the West and the non-West.

Furthermore, as I have discussed in chapter one (introduction), the focus on the critiques of European imperialism within post-colonial discourses cannot sufficiently address issues of post-coloniality in South Korea since Korean society has experienced both Japanese colonialism (1910-1945) and the US cultural hegemony (1945-to the present). In order to foreground the complexities of post-colonial discourses in South Korea, I have focused on the ways in which the legacies of Japanese colonialism and US cultural imperialism function in the production and circulation of meanings, identities, desires, and ideologies in relation to notions of ideal femininity and the changing meanings of the female body.

I have also challenged gender-neutral narratives of the cultural history of South Korea, which have been prevalent in the field of Korean Studies in both Korea and the US. I emphasize the need to take into consideration how colonizing forces operate differently for women than for men and how Korean nationalist discourses construct gendered citizenship while interpellating men as the primary members of modern South Korea. I have noticed that recent studies by Korean and Korean-American female scholars since the 1990s attempt to re-write the cultural history of South Korea from a feminist point-of-view (e.g., through fieldwork and interviews with diverse groups of Korean women). This dissertation is indebted to their work, and at the same time intends to participate in these discourses.

Based on these theoretical concerns, I examine the complex relationships between Korean cinema's construction of femininity and female audiences' interpretations of such representations while problematizing and disrupting the master narratives of Western theoretical thinking, colonial and post-colonial discourses, as well as Korean nationalist discourses. In order to analyze the representations of femininity in Korean cinema, I have performed semiotic and discourse analyses of the on-screen and off-screen personae of Choi Eun-Hee, Chang Mi-Hee, and Jun Ji-Hyun. I chose to look at these three stars not necessarily because they were the most representative actresses of their time but because they embodied very distinctive images and different female sexuality when compared to each other.

While focusing on the star images and stardom of Choi Eun-Hee, Chang Mi-Hee, and Jun Ji-Hyun, this dissertation has tackled the following research questions: what kinds of femininity or female sexuality these three Korean actresses respectively embody in response to different kinds of patriarchies and the changing representational politics in post-colonial Korea; what myths or tropes are involved in these stars' images and what the underlying fantasy appeal of each star is in relation to the dominant discourses produced by Korean nationalism, the film industry, the legacies of colonialism, and emergent globalizing forces.

In order to answer these questions I have conducted semiotic analyses of the character roles and types that the three stars each portrayed as well as the narrative structure and shared elements across the different films in which they starred. In doing so, my analysis focused on the values and meanings such character types

signified within the dominant discourses of their time while combining critical scholarship with the life experiences of Korean and Korean-American women. I have incorporated diverse views in critical scholarship produced across different fields of studies in both Korea and the US academia (e.g., Film and Media Studies, Cultural Studies, literature, sociology, history, anthropology, Women's Studies) in regards to the social, historical factors operating behind the production and circulation of star images of Choi, Chang, and Jun. My primary source of information about the lived experiences of Korean and Korean-American women was focus group interviews. I conducted four different focus group interviews with women from different ages and cultural backgrounds in an effort to argue against the binary structure of the West and the non-West and instead explore the complexities of Korean female subjectivity in a cross-cultural, interconnected context.

These women's responses have informed my semiotic and discourse analyses of the three stars' images and their stardom. In other words, I shaped my arguments based on the words they spoke during the interviews and their shared or contrasting views between groups in response to particular stars. At the same time, in an effort to understand the discursive system within which particular topics or issues were discussed, I drew on discussions or arguments by other scholars on such topics. By balancing my own views with my interviewees' responses and other scholars' work, this dissertation has explored the continuity and discontinuity that exist across the changing patriarchal values and representational politics over time in post-colonial

Korea, particularly in relation to the notions of femininity and gender relations in Korean and Asian societies.

The socio-economic changes in post-colonial South Korean society have brought about fundamental shifts in the formulation of ideal femininity and a desiring female body. However, the ideology of neo-Confucianism from the pre-modern era still operates in shaping the dominant discourses around the star images Choi Eun-Hee, Chang Mi-Hee, and Jun Ji-Hyun. While neo-Confucian ideas continue to construct the female as a primarily physical body rather than an autonomous subject in collusion with male-centered Korean nationalist discourses and later-imported Western patriarchal values, the social changes in modern South Korea have transformed the cultural meanings and ideological values attached to the female norm. This dissertation has focused on the images of the three stars within this dialectic relation between continuity and discontinuity in the popular representation of ideal femininity and female sexuality.

Choi Eun-Hee, who emerged as a star during the late 1950s, played many different roles throughout her career (including a new woman and *yanggongju*), but her typical character type was that of a self-sacrificial mother whose roles were defined by a Confucian patriarchal order. She embodies the idea of a non-Western, Third World woman who is tradition-bound, sexually constrained, domestic, and victimized (i.e., the essentialist image constructed by Western feminist scholarship). However, my interviewees (the middle-aged Korean and Korean-American women in groups one and two) provided positive responses to this star while interpreting her as

a strong and outstanding woman. These positive evaluations at once stem from and participate in the discursive formation of the strong Korean mother ideal, which emphasizes the importance of a mother's role not only as a head of the household in the absence of men, but also as a stronghold of disrupted society in the context of national partition and reconstruction.

Chang Mi-Hee's stardom coincides with the time when South Korean society experienced rapid economic growth under the military dictatorship and state-controlled capitalism during the 1970s and 1980s. I have argued that Chang's on-screen persona embodies a modern-day *Kisaeng* or comfort woman in the sense that her characters are willing to provide sexual services in order to comfort or console Korean men who are stressed out and exhausted in the midst of fast-paced economic growth and political upheavals. As Chang's excessive sexuality outside of a family defies the ideology of *tongdosŏgi* (a nationalist discourse originated from neo-Confucianism to preserve the Eastern/Korean way in the mental sphere while adopting Western technology), the effeminate male characters in Chang's films take the role of protecting, disciplining and often punishing Chang's body on behalf of the modern Korean nation. The Korean and Korean-American women whom I interviewed remembered the historical period of Chang's stardom as a dark era when the whole society was undergoing repressive military rule. Although Korean women tended to sympathize with Chang based on their shared experience of military culture, the interviewees in both groups one and two generally offered critical views of Chang's images and her films, particularly of her off-screen images for being fake

(group two) and the voyeuristic male gaze and female objectifications in Chang's films (groups one and two).

Jun Ji-Hyun portrays an ideal girlfriend type as the Korean and Korean-American young females in the focus groups have observed. Through her sassy and pure-hearted girl image, she has proven her star power in films and television commercials not only in Korea but across Asia as well. My interviewees (the young Korean females in group four) pointed to a situation where Jun's body emerged as a channel that carried commercial or consumerist concepts and ideas. I have argued that Jun's body functions as a commodity-sign and drives postmodern consumption practices among the youth and the middle-class throughout Asia in an era of globalization. While the legacy of neo-Confucianism (with its emphasis on the female body) still operates in reinforcing Jun's virginal purity, which my interviewees in both groups three and four viewed as an unrealistic representation, Jun's star images signify a shift away from the meta-narratives of the nation-state to the lightness of Western consumerism and commercialism. In other words, the heavy responsibilities of struggle for national identity and solidarity disappear in the discourses of Jun's star images and her stardom produced under globalizing forces.

To sum up, Choi Eun-Hee's typical image as a self-sacrificial "wise mother, good wife" embodies the notion of the asexual, reproductive body in the pre-industrial society. Chang Mi-Hee, on the other hand, represents the laboring body during the capitalist industrial stage in South Korea. However, Chang's sexual labor received negative and critical responses from my interviewees who regarded the



female factory workers' manual labor during the 1970s and 1980s as more valuable and legitimate. With the advent of intensified consumerist culture in Korea and Asia, Jun's body encapsulates the notion of the consuming body in the post-industrial society under global capitalism. Women now became more important as consumers than mothers or laborers shifting the utility of their bodies from re/production to consumption.

The discourses surrounding the images of the three stars, thus, involve the processes of re-writing and over-writing while revealing the still intact neo-Confucian tradition operating behind the construction of a female norm and social relations of gender in post-colonial South Korea. South Korea's founding elites, military leaders, and male writers and directors all alike contributed to the creation of authentic Koreanness and modern South Korea's total unity and collective identity firmly based on neo-Confucian principles over the course of post-colonial history of Korea. As a result, the pre-capitalist Confucian patriarchy and its associated values (e.g., devoted and self-sacrificial mother, female chastity based on the "one husband to the last" ideology) build on the later-imported capitalist patriarchal attitudes and practices. In the process, Japanese colonial practices and values (e.g., the "wise mother, good wife" ideal, the techniques for discipline and punishment) linger in the hegemonic formation of the normative female role in Korean cinema, on which Western cultural values and ideas are superimposed (e.g., a housewife or a rational manager of the nuclear family under capitalist patriarchy, the voyeuristic male gaze upon Chang and Jun's bodies, Western consumerism). Therefore, the star images of Choi Eun-Hee,

Chang Mi-Hee, and Jun Ji-Hyun reveal the workings of these multi-layered and overlapping ideological discourses while exposing contradictions at work rather than resolving them within these discourses.

Most of the Korean and Korean-American women with whom I came to contact over the course of research and writing this dissertation (including the interviewees in my focus groups) did not question the fact that Choi Eun-Hee was the most popular and memorable female star in Korean film during the late 1950s and the 1960s, but many of them questioned the inclusion of Chang Mi-Hee and Jun Ji-Hyun on the grounds that they did not judge them to be good actresses. In fact, a few of my interviewees wondered if I still wanted to interview them even when they were not fans of Chang Mi-Hee and Jun Ji-Hyun. The reason I went ahead and had interviews with them was because this dissertation is concerned with the discourses surrounding the stars' images rather than studying fandom or evaluating the acting prowess of these actresses.

Getting interviewees was not easy, particularly for the group of Korean-American middle-aged women due to the small size of the Korean-American population in Kansas. I did, however, meet with a few Korean-American middle-aged women who were married to American GIs and who lived in Junction City, Kansas, but I was not able to gain entry into this community. I also wanted to interview Korean and Korean-American women who were close to Choi Eun-Hee's age. I contacted two Korean women in their seventies but due to scheduling difficulties they could not participate in the focus group interview. I have to

acknowledge the limitation of this dissertation in using a small sample (i.e., four focus groups mostly consist of educated, middle-class women). However, the selection and organization of the four focus groups is not intended to make a claim about representative sampling. In other words, I do not claim that the women in these focus groups are representative of their age and social group. Relying on qualitative data gathered from the four focus groups, this dissertation has incorporated the interviewees' views with my own analysis in an effort to provide a more empirically grounded research.

Korean women's complex subjectivity is inextricably implicated in the historical processes of colonization, decolonization, and re-colonization which have repressed their right to speak for themselves for a long period of time. However, this dissertation insists upon the possibility of resistance on the part of the subaltern female in post-colonial Korea. As discussed in the literature review, Rey Chow argues for a new feminist subjectivity that emerges when the marginalized female transforms her Westernized consciousness into "resistance-in-givenness" (a dialectical negotiation with what is "given" by the West). With a similar reasoning, I believe that Korean women (or any subaltern subjects) are able to create a critical space where the power-invested processes of hierarchization and marginalization are continually challenged and deconstructed by critically engaging with or negotiating what is given by the double colonization (e.g, legacies of both Japanese colonialism and US cultural hegemony, which are in collusion with Korean patriarchal discourses). By consciously identifying and resisting the dominant ways of looking

and knowing, the subaltern female can place themselves outside of the ideological discourses of female subordination and marginalization, and critically gaze upon and engage with such discourses.

I plan to publish this dissertation as a book in the hope that this research will stimulate critical discussions about diverse cultural issues related to post-colonial Korea and across Asia. This book will further explore the experiences of and conversations between heterogeneous groups of Korean women in terms of their age, social class, and geographical location in an effort to provide an empirical basis upon which a more well-rounded post-colonial feminist theory can be formulated. This effort will mark a continuation of my long-term research project, which is a study of Korean women (including Korean women who became diasporic around the world throughout modern Korean history) as an interpretive community who bring together their cultural past and collective experiences in the production and consumption of their cultural products.

Over the course of my doctoral studies, I noted that the number of research on the representations of Asians or Asian Americans is quite limited compared to other racial and ethnic groups in the United States (e.g., African Americans, Native Americans and Latino/Latinas). I would like to share and compare my theoretical position (particularly, post-colonial feminism) and the findings of this research with scholars in Asian Studies who seek to investigate Asian communities as a socially and historically meaningful group.

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## Appendix A.

### Chronology of Historical and Political Events in (South) Korea

<u>1392-1910</u>	Chosŏn Dynasty
<u>1910-1945</u>	Japanese Colonial Era
1930	Choi Eun-Hee born.
<u>1945-1948</u>	U.S. Army Military Rule
1947	Establishment of the People's Democratic Republic of Korea (North Korea)
1948	Establishment of the Republic of Korea (South Korea)
<u>1948-1960</u>	First Republic (President Syngman Rhee)
1950-1953	Korean War
1958	Chang Mi-Hee born.
<u>1960-1961</u>	Second Republic (Prime Minister Chang Myon)
1961	Military Coup led by General Park Chung-Hee Choi Eun-Hee starred in <i>Mother and a Guest</i>
<u>1961-1963</u>	Military Junta Rule
<u>1963-1972</u>	Third Republic (President Park Chung-Hee)
<u>1972-1979</u>	Fourth Republic (President Park Chung-Hee)
1977	Chang Mi-Hee starred in <i>Winter Woman</i>
1979	Assassination of President Park Military Coup led by General Chun Doo-Hwan
<u>1980-1987</u>	Fifth Republic (President Chun Doo-Hwan)
1981	Jun Ji-Hyun born.
<u>1988-1992</u>	Sixth Republic (President Roh Tae-Woo)
<u>1993-1997</u>	President Kim Young-Sam
<u>1998-2002</u>	President Kim Dae-Jung
2000	The Inter-Korean Summit Meeting in Pyŏngyang
2001	Jun Ji-Hyun starred in <i>My Sassy Girl</i>
<u>2003-2007</u>	President Roh Moo-Hyun
<u>2008-</u>	President Lee Myung-Bak

Appendix B.

**The Questionnaire Form Used in the Focus Group Interviews**

“Seeing Stars: Female Film Stars and Female Audiences in Post-colonial Korea”

JaeYoon Park

Theatre & Film, University of Kansas

Your Name:

Your Age:

Your Ethnicity:

Your Job:

Your Marital Status:

Were you born in the United States?

If not, why and when did you come to the United States?

Your Favorite Korean Actress(es):

Your Favorite American Actress(es):

Your Favorite Film Genre, Style, or Director(s):

Have you ever seen any films in which Choi Eun-Hee or Chang Mi-Hee starred? If so, which film(s) have you seen?

If so, where, when, with whom did you see the films?

Have you heard about Choi Eun-Hee or Chang Mi-Hee? If so, through what sources?

Thank you very much for your time and participation. I may contact you later if I have further questions regarding your comments during the interview. Please write your contact information below.

Telephone Number:

E-mail Address:

감사합니다!